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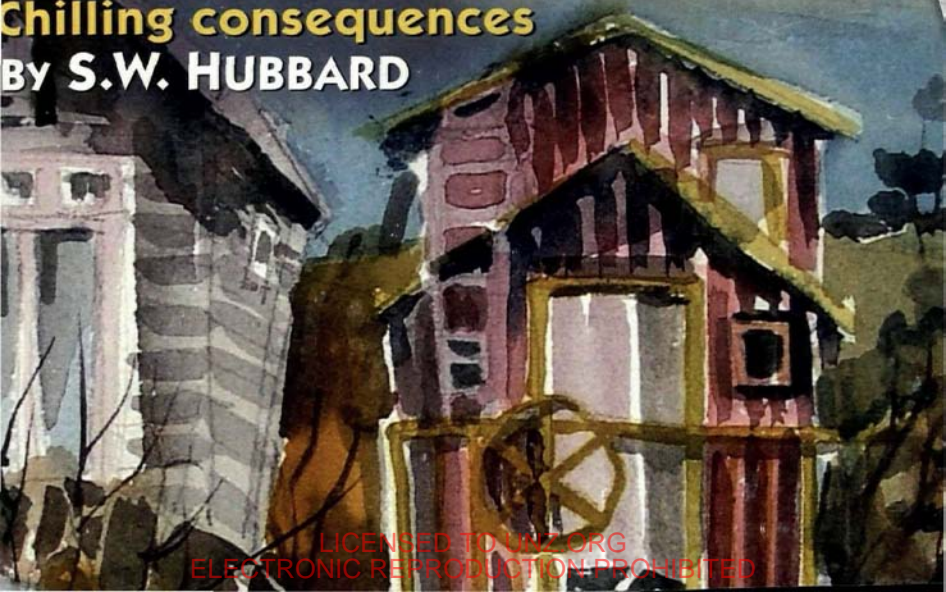
ALFRED MYSTERY MAGAZINE **HITCHCOCK**®

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2008

Chainsaw Nativity

**Seasonal mischief,
Chilling consequences**

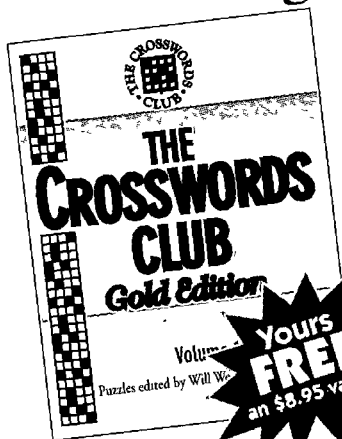
By S.W. HUBBARD



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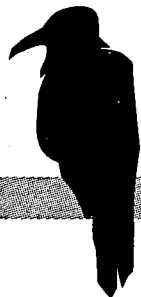
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HAPPY HOLIDAYS!



Joel Spector

FROM THE STAFF OF AHMM

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CHAINSAW NATIVITY

S. W. HUBBARD

The Thanksgiving turkey had not yet been served, but as soon as the first snow fell, signs of Christmas began popping up around Trout Run, New York. The ladies' crafts circle hung an elaborate wreath on the door of the Presbyterian Church, while the bartender at the Mountainside strung tinsel over the beer kegs and mounted an erratically lighted sign that proclaimed MERRY CHRISTMAS, a slurred teleprompter for the patrons perched on his wobbly barstools. North Country Country 93.3 played Dwight Yoakum's "Here Comes Santa Claus" at least once an hour; every night a few more houses glowed with fairy lights. And on the town green, Bucky Rheinholz's chainsaw Nativity was unveiled.

Frank Bennett dodged through the Nativity-viewing crowd, already dense at ten in the morning. He would have liked to pause and look at the statues again himself, but he was already late for his meeting with Pastor Bob Rush. Charging into the church office out of breath, Frank saw he needn't have hurried. No Myrna at the front desk, no Bob in the pastor's study. Then from the kitchen he heard voices.

"Yesterday the milk disappeared, today it's the sugar. I tell you, I can't put anything in this kitchen without it being carried off."

"You know they need it, Myrna. Just go buy some more." Frank came around the corner in time to see Bob pull ten bucks from his pocket.

"If they need help, all they have to do is ask. This is stealing, plain and simple."

"Problem?" Frank asked.

Myrna and Bob froze. "Nothing we need police help with, thank you anyway, Frank. Myrna's being called to do God's work."

Myrna took the cash and stalked out the door.

"Seems to be a little static interfering with His signal."

Bob smiled. "If everyone could hear the message loud and clear, I'd be out of a job. Now, tell me what you want to do about this traffic problem I've created."



They walked to the front door of the church as a tour bus from Albany pulled up to the green, disgorging fifty camera-toting senior citizens.

Frank had watched in amazement the week before as Bucky Reinholz and three burly men wrangled the well-wrapped pieces of the Nativity off a flatbed truck borrowed from the lumberyard. Each statue was as big as the men who carried it, and by the time they had them all unloaded, the crew was red faced and sweating even in the brisk November air.

Frank had helped cut away the paper and padding protecting the figures, and as each cover fell away, he grew more amazed. Chainsaw art cropped up all over the Adirondacks, in little souvenir shops and craft fairs, or set up on front lawns with hand-painted FOR SALE signs. Mostly totem poles or bears sitting on their haunches—if you'd seen one, you'd seen them all.

Frank fell squarely into the "I don't know much, but I know what I like" school of art criticism, but even to his unschooled eye, Bucky Reinholz's chainsaw Nativity qualified as a masterpiece. The kneeling Mary radiated a tender joy; the shepherd looked curious and a little fearful; one of the three kings glanced skyward as if he wasn't sure that star could be trusted. The infant Jesus in his manger had been carved from an enormous stump, the baby emerging as if the tree itself had given birth.

Frank had wandered from statue to statue, entranced. Up close, the rough cuts of the chainsaw seemed to obliterate the figures' features, but when you took a few steps back you saw that the grooves themselves were what created their astonishingly lifelike expressions. The effect was magical, and Frank couldn't stop examining them.

"You did all this with a *chainsaw*?"

"A five horsepower Husqvarna, mostly," Bucky said.

"How long did it take?"

"Um, close on to three years, I guess. Had a little trouble with the first baby Jesus. Wood wasn't fully dried, and after I had it all carved, I came out to the shop one morning and found it cracked right down the middle." Bucky grinned, revealing the large strong incisors that had given him his nickname.

Frank thought he seemed awfully good natured about his setback. "Didn't it bother you to lose something you'd worked so hard on?" He'd built a pretty mahogany end table once, and a wild little friend of his daughter's had knocked it over and taken a big chunk out of it. He still bore that kid a grudge, twenty years later.

"Oh, no use to complain. Besides, the second one turned out even better."

"Are you going to move all this back to your shop after Christmas?"

Bucky slapped his thigh. "Hell, no. This is my gift to Trout Run. Pastor Bob and Ardyth Munger have some crazy notion it'll be a tourist attraction to raise money for the church."

And the crazy notion had proved true. Which brought them to today's problem. The chainsaw Nativity was attracting so many sightseers that traffic in the one-stoplight town was totally balled up.

"Earl spends his whole day out here directing traffic," Frank complained to Pastor Bob. "The kid hasn't had a day off since the Nativity went on display."

"You're not suggesting we take it down, I hope?" Bob asked. "All the businesses in town are benefiting."

"No, no—I really like it too. But could you organize some guys from the church to help with traffic control?"

"No problem. I'll pitch in myself if you think Earl will let me wear that orange reflective vest."

They strolled onto the green, wandering among the statues. This time, Frank took particular notice of the Joseph. Bucky had carved him sitting, gazing at his wife and the child. He looked stunned, as if he couldn't absorb what had happened to him. Frank remembered feeling that way himself in the delivery room, staring at Estelle and the wrinkled little bundle that was their daughter, Caroline.

"I think of all the statues, Joseph is my favorite."

"Yes, I like him too," Bob agreed. "Joseph is so underrated. Just think—his fiancée comes to him with this extraordinary story that she's pregnant, but still a virgin, and the child she's carrying is the son of God. And instead of casting her out to be stoned to death for adultery, he agrees to protect her and marry her and raise the child as his own." Bob touched the puzzled but trusting wooden brow of Joseph. "He believes Mary."

Frank continued to stare at the statue. Trust. Maybe that was what made the Joseph so unusual. Trust wasn't an expression you saw much on the face of a grown man. And Bucky had somehow captured that with his chainsaw. Go figure.

Crime in Trout Run peaked each week between four P.M. on Friday afternoon, when the men at Stevenson's Lumberyard received their paychecks, and two A.M. on Saturday, when they had drunk them half away at the Mountainside Tavern. Frank made a point of stopping by the Mountainside late every Friday night.

Tonight's crowd wasn't rowdy, but a certain edginess hung in the air. A group of men in hunters' camo sat at the bar complaining.

"Greg Haney's had my rifle for close on two weeks and he still don't have it fixed. What am I supposed to do, with buck season starting in three more days?"

"I don't care if he is a cripple—that just ain't right."

"I heard he kept Herb's shotgun for nearly a month."

"And what's more, when you call up to ask about it, he won't talk to you. Makes his girl say he can't come to the phone. Hides out behind his kids 'cause he knows I won't swear at them."

"I have half a mind to go out there and collect my gun. I don't care if it's in a million little pieces."

"Greg's a helluva gunsmith, but it seems like he can't keep up with the work since the accident."

The grousing continued, but since everyone agreed about Greg Haney's poor service and the object of their complaint wasn't present, Frank left them to it. He checked out the action in the game room, where Ray Stulke was trying to hustle a pool game from two young men clearly marked as tourists by the lift tickets stuck to the zippers of their expensive ski jackets. They might as well have worn signs reading FLEECE ME. Frank sat down, estimating ten minutes for Ray to lure them into a double-or-nothing bet, three for him to sink every ball on the table, and thirty seconds for the fight to break out.

But the tourists were both better gamblers and better pool players than Frank gave them credit for, and Ray had to work hard to win. The game ended in laughter and back slapping and offers to buy the next round. Frank rose to leave as the jukebox began to play "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen." He'd judged the atmosphere at the Mountainside all wrong. Maybe, just for the Christmas season, he should take a page from Joseph's book and be a little more trusting. The sound of the crowd joining in on the refrain followed him into the parking lot, and hung in the still, cold air:

"Oh tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy."

As Frank drove past the green on his way home, the floodlights illuminating the Nativity snapped off. In the split second before the brilliance evaporated, Frank thought he noticed something off kilter. He drove around slowly, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the soft reflection of moonlight on snow. The wooden shepherd offered genuine concern for his shivering lambs. The three kings still marched toward their goal. The donkey's big eyes studied the store and the diner.

When Frank reached the third side of the square, he realized what was wrong.

Joseph was gone.



"What's the point, that's what I'd like to know?"

Unable to sleep most of the night, Frank had roused Earl out of bed at daybreak and the two of them stood surveying the scene of the Joseph kidnapping. "Bucky made something beautiful for the town and now some idiot has to come along and ruin it." Frank kicked up a cloud of soft snow. "It pisses me off."

"You got any ideas on who coulda done it?"

Frank scowled and shrugged. His favorite usual suspect, Ray Stulke, was both strong enough and stupid enough for the job, but he had the best alibi in town. At the time of the crime, he'd been under Frank's watchful eye at the Mountainside.

"That statue had to weigh two hundred pounds," Earl said. "It must've taken them quite a while to haul it out of here."

"They dragged it." Frank looked at the deep parallel gouges the base of the statue had left in the snow. He could only pick out a few intact bootprints; the trampled snow looked as if the thieves had barely lifted their feet as they staggered along with their heavy load. A few deep depressions marked where the thieves had plopped the statue down to take a rest. The trail led to the darkest, least traveled side of the green, where Etta Noakes's house stood in solitary decay.

"We could ask Miss Noakes if she saw anything," Earl suggested. But even as they trudged over to the sagging Victorian, they knew it was hopeless. Miss Noakes was either ninety or ninety-two, depending on how cantankerous she was feeling at the moment you asked her. She opened the door, peering at them through cataract-scarred eyes, and answered their question with the tart reminder that, unlike some people in this town, she did not spend all her time gawping out the window, keeping track of folks coming and going.

She shouted out to them as they left. "It's not someone from town. Bucky Reinholz doesn't have an enemy on this planet. People in Trout Run are damn proud of that Nativity."

Frank hunched his shoulders against the cold, not bothering to acknowledge Etta's remarks. She had a point, but who did that leave? Tourists stashing a two-hundred-pound souvenir in the back of their minivan? Jealous rivals from a town with a mere plaster Nativity? Atheist extremists? Each idea seemed more absurd than the next.

"Maybe it's kids playing a joke," Earl offered hopefully. "Like when the senior class moved the bear from the taxidermy shop to the pulpit of the church."

"That was funny. This . . ." Frank shook his head. This might be destroying something because the perfection of it cried out for

disruption—the freshly painted wall scrawled with graffiti, the windows broken in a row of parked cars. He'd arrested a kid once for shooting out every streetlight on a block, and when he'd asked him why he did it the answer came, "Because I like it dark."

"You want me to drive around and look at places they might've taken it?" Earl asked. "Like maybe the covered bridge or the cliffs by the river."

Frank snorted. If the statue had been left anywhere obvious they'd have received a dozen calls by now. But Earl was only trying to be helpful. Frank tossed him the patrol car keys. "Yeah, cruise around. See what you turn up." He watched Earl drive off, more worried the kid would find the statue—tossed in a ditch, its head chopped off, or covered in spray paint—than that he wouldn't. He clenched his fists. This was the kind of dread cops felt when a child went missing, where solving the case was often worse than not solving it. Ridiculous—Joseph was a statue, just a block of wood. A block of wood.

Twenty-four hours and Joseph still hadn't been spotted. The prank theory looked less and less likely—stunts were only fun if everyone could see how clever you'd been. Frank had ended up in the church office on his rounds—futile so far—of looking for a motive for this crime.

"I don't see why you're spending so much time worrying about it," Myrna said. "Since that TV station in Plattsburgh put the theft on the news, more people than ever are coming to see the Nativity."

"Yes, but they're coming for the wrong reason." Pastor Bob rolled the new issue of *Presbyterian Life* into a tight cone as he looked out the window at the crowd on the green. "Bucky carved those statues to tell the Christmas story. But the whole story's not there. Now people are coming to see what happened, like rubber neckers at a car wreck."

"Right reason, wrong reason," Myrna muttered, slapping stamps on the outgoing mail. "Can't you just move one of the shepherds into the manger and call him Joseph?"

Bob spun around behind Myrna's back with the magazine raised high, and for a split second Frank felt sure the pastor was going to whack her.

"Sure, put a tricorn hat on Michelangelo's David and call him George Washington." Bob flung his magazine into Myrna's trash-can, which rocked with the force of his shot after the pastor was halfway down the hall.

"Well, look who's off his high horse, now that something that

matters to *him* has been stolen. No more of that 'turn the other cheek, what would Jesus do' stuff." Myrna tossed her envelopes in the outgoing mail basket. "Now you don't hear him saying, 'If they stole it, they must *really* need it,'" Myrna mimicked in a cruelly accurate recreation of Bob's often otherworldly tone. "Nobody really needs a chainsaw Joseph, do they?"

"Do you know there's not a single Christmas carol that mentions Joseph?"

Earl looked up from typing a report and frowned at his boss.

"Every figure in the Nativity gets sung about—Mary and Jesus, of course, but the Wise Men, the shepherds, even the damn cow gets a mention in "Away in a Manger." But not Joseph. No one sings about Joseph."

"And your point is—?"

"My point is, if you were going to steal a statue from a Nativity scene to make some sort of statement, why would you pick that one?" Frank couldn't quite let go of the idea that the Joseph statue had been stolen for a reason. "Why not take Jesus?"

"Too heavy. The baby and the manger are all one piece, carved from that elm stump."

"All right, why not Mary or a Wise Man?"

Earl shrugged and answered the ringing phone, leaving Frank to pace the office.

After a few disinterested "all right, okay, uhm-hmms," Earl hung up. "That was Rod Fortney out at the Round Top Mountain Cabins. Says he's got a customer who owes him money. Wants us to go out there."

"What are we, a collection agency? Tell him to buy a vacuum cleaner and some Comet and people might be willing to settle up."

"You want me to go?" Earl asked.

"No," Frank grumbled. "I'll do it. Take my mind off this damn statue."

Any woman who mistakenly crossed the threshold of these cabins took one look at the rust-stained sinks and gray sheets and turned tail, leaving the Round Top as the exclusive domain of young men for whom skiing or fishing or ice-climbing was a flimsy excuse for a weekend of nonstop drinking. Frank was sure he'd find a group of hungover frat boys turning their pockets inside out in a futile search for cash after being informed that the American Express card wasn't welcome here.

But when he arrived the parking lot was empty and Rod stood outside the office, practically hopping up and down.

"Guys skipped out on you?" Frank asked.

"No, they paid for their room. Slipped a check under the door early this morning. Then they sped outta here in that big SUV before I could do my inspection. C'mere." Rod sunk his bony fingers into Frank's arm and pulled him toward the cabins. "See what they done to this room."

The door to cabin seven stood open, allowing the fetid smell of spilled beer, unwashed socks, and vomit to waft out. The cramped, four-bed room was certainly filthy, but Frank suspected it hadn't been all that much cleaner when the party checked in.

"I'm goin' to hafta hire the girl to come in and help me clean this. And lookit that big scratch on the paneling." Rod nudged him through the doorway and pointed out a fresh mar in the well-seasoned knotty pine. "And they stole one of the quilts. There was a matched set in here."

That must make cabin seven the Presidential Suite. Amidst the tangled and strewn bedding there seemed to be only three revolting green and gold quilted bedspreads. So the charges were really stacking up against these guys: theft of services for precipitating the need for a cleaning lady, plus burglary for one stolen Vietnam War-era bedcover.

"I'll see what I can do, Rod. Can you describe the guys?"

"Big guys, all of 'em. Early twenties. Short hair and neat clothes, but one of 'em had a big tattoo on his arm. Some kinda snake or lizard or somethin'."

Frank stepped back outside, glad of the crisp air. A patch of color in the black and white landscape caught his eye: a ragged square of green and gold fabric caught on the bare branches of a bush. Beside it were two parallel marks in the snow, as if something had been dragged into the trees behind the cabin. Frank followed the trail until it ended in a small clump of woods. There was a wide depression in the snow where something heavy and long had clearly been dropped.

"That cloth's from my bedspread." Rod said. "Why'd they bring it out here in the snow?"

Frank continued to stare at the drag marks. "They wrapped something in it. They left it out here overnight—there wasn't enough room for it in the cabin. Then they put it in their SUV and drove off with it."

"What was it? Why?"

"I'm pretty sure what, but I can't imagine why."

Frank pulled up in front of 120 Center Street, Glens Falls, the address printed on the check presented by one Russell Begley to

pay for cabin seven. Stupid crooks made police work so much easier. And there was the black Ford Expedition, meaning Mr. Begley was home. Frank peered into the back of the huge SUV to see if the Joseph statue was still there, but his luck wasn't running quite that good. The cargo area was empty.

Frank leaned on the bell and the door was soon opened by a tall, well-built young man with an affable face. Was that a shadow of unease when he saw a uniformed cop on his doorstep? If so, he rebounded quickly.

"Good afternoon, Officer—what can I do for you?"

"Russell Begley?"

"That's me," he smiled.

"Mr. Begley, you and your friends stayed at the Round Top Mountain Cabins in Trout Run recently, is that so?"

"Uh . . . yeah."

"You left the room a bit of a mess. Took off with something that didn't belong to you."

Begley looked edgy.

"A green and gold bedspread."

"Oh yeah, right." The tension drained out of his face. "Look, I'm sorry about that. My friend, he had a little too much to drink, and well, I don't think you'd really want it back now." He reached for his wallet. "I'm happy to pay for it, and any other damage we caused."

"That's very cooperative of you, Mr. Begley." Frank smiled but made no move to take the proffered money. "I'm also interested in knowing the whereabouts of what you had rolled up in the bedspread."

A fine sheen of sweat broke out on Begley's forehead, and Frank knew he had his man. "In?" the word came out like a cricket's chirp. He cleared his throat and tried again. "Nothing was in the blanket."

"Oh, I think there was. You dragged it behind the cabin, then loaded it into your SUV."

Begley was looking like he might toss his lunch right there. "I don't want to talk to you anymore. I want to call a lawyer."

What a chump! Call in a lawyer for a stupid prank like this. It'd be Easter before they got the statue back if some shyster got in the middle of the process. "Look, Mr. Begley, I'm not interested in prosecuting you for this stunt. I want the statue back. As long as it's not damaged, you have nothing to worry about. Give it back to me and I'll leave."

Begley's breathing was audible. Finally he spoke. "The statue. Right. The statue that's been on the news. Well, see, I don't exactly have that anymore."

"Where is it?"

"We, uh, sold it."

"Sold it! To whom?"

"To, uh, a guy. A guy at the rest stop on the thruway." Begley's words came faster and faster. "He saw it in the SUV, and he liked it and asked what did we want for it, so he gave us a hundred bucks, and we gave him the statue. Because, see, we really didn't want to keep it anymore, after we sobered up." Begley pulled out his wallet again. "Here, you can have that money too."

The next week Begley appeared in municipal court to answer the charge of criminal trespass, pleaded guilty, and got probation as a first-time offender. No one went to Attica for stealing chain-saw art. As far as the law was concerned, the case was closed.

As far as Trout Run was concerned, it was wide open.

"Why can't you get this guy to tell you what he did with Joseph?"

That was the question Frank answered all day long, from Bucky and Bob and Earl to people standing in line with him at the post office. Over and over he explained that real life wasn't the same as TV, that he didn't get to knock suspects around until they were reduced to quivering wrecks who told all. Not that he wouldn't have liked to rattle the chain of a guy who brought a three-hundred-dollar-an-hour Albany lawyer to a municipal court appearance. Something hinky there.

After a particularly grueling session that ruined his lunch at the diner, Frank headed across the green for the relative safety of his office. He stepped on the path that led through the Nativity scene in time to see a lanky boy shoot out of the church, an aqua Tupperware container clutched under his arm like a football. And there, pursuing him like a Jets linebacker, was Myrna.

"Stop, thief!" Myrna shrieked. "Stop him."

Frank stepped forward to intercept the boy, who dodged him, slipped, and fell in the snow, the Tupperware rolling to a stop in front of a winded Myrna.

"What's going on?" Frank asked, holding the elbow of the squirming boy.

"He stole the chicken salad for the Parish Sages luncheon, that's what's going on," Myrna said. "I was up late last night making that, and he thinks he can stroll off with it. Well, I've had enough! This has got to stop."

By this time Pastor Bob had showed up. "Take your chicken salad and go, Myrna. There's no need to create a scene." He turned to Frank. "Let the boy go."

Frank released the boy's arm, and he took off like a rocket. "I think it's time you tell me about your theft problem over there."

"It's Greg Haney's kids." Bob had run out without his coat and stood shivering as he explained. "They're obviously not getting enough to eat at home with their mother dead and their dad disabled, so they've been stealing food from the church. I've called Greg several times offering to help, even went over there, but his daughter insists they're all right. Greg won't even talk to me. He's stubborn and proud."

Frank steered Bob toward his office. Neither of them was eager to encounter Myrna right now. "We'll have to call Social Services."

Bob sighed. "I guess. I hate to get a government bureaucracy involved. We can take care of our own here. Ardyth Munger's been leaving a bag of groceries on the Haney's porch every week. She sees Greg in his workroom, but he ignores her knocking."

"Well, obviously that's not enough," Frank said as they entered the office. "The county social worker will know how to help."

As Frank worked his way through the department of social services' automated answering system, he glanced at the papers that had landed in his box while he was out. The state police weekly missing persons report.

"Your call is important to us. Please stay on the line," a computerized voice droned in his ear.

He glanced through the report as he waited. A teenage girl in Buffalo, an Alzheimer's patient in Schenectady. Nothing of interest to him.

"All lines are still busy. Please continue to hold."

Frank flipped to the second page of the report. A twenty-three-year-old man last seen a week ago in the vicinity of Lake Placid. Travis Monteith. He read with more attention. "Colleagues report Monteith planned to go skiing for the weekend. He never returned to work. Height: six-two; weight: one-ninety; hair: brown; eyes: brown; identifying marks: tattoo of iguana on right forearm."

"Department of Social Services. How may I help you? Hello?"

Frank hung up the phone and grabbed his jacket.

"Where are you going?"

He brushed past Bob. Humiliation at what he had overlooked and dread of what he would find took away his voice.

"Frank, should I come with you?"

"It's too late for that."

Frank pounded on the door of the Haney's house in the late afternoon twilight. "Police. Open up." To the right of the porch, a one-story wing extended from the house. A soft light glowed

behind the sheer curtain of the front window, where a man sat with his head bent. Greg Haney's workroom, but Greg didn't flinch at the racket coming from his front door.

"Danielle Haney, are you in there?" Frank shouted. "Open this door or I'll kick it in."

Frank heard shuffling on the other side of the door, as if the girl had been inches away all along. The door swung inward and Frank saw a tall, slender teenager trembling in the hall. He pushed past her and turned right, into the large rectangular room where Greg Haney repaired guns. Low shelves lined the walls, filled with parts and tools easily within reach of a man confined to a wheelchair. At the worktable by the window a man sat, his head bowed, his forehead furrowed, for all the world concentrating on the disassembled gun before him.

But the work never progressed. The man was made of wood.

Frank turned to find Danielle and her brother, a big, slack-jawed boy, watching him.

"Where is your father?"

"That's a secret!" the boy protested. "Don't tell the man the secret, Danielle, remember?"

The girl looked much smaller to Frank than she had a few minutes before, diminished by weariness and sorrow and fear. She pointed her brother toward the door. "Let's go in the kitchen, Derek. I'll make you hot chocolate." Then she glanced back over her shoulder and nodded slightly in the direction of the backyard. "We had to," she whispered.

Had to. Had to conceal their father's death because they hadn't called a doctor for him when he needed one? Had to let him die because the burden of caring for him had grown too heavy? And he and Bob and Ardyth and Greg's customers had allowed it to happen; had kept a safe distance, not wanting to trample on Greg's dignity. The north country credo: Don't butt in.

Frank's fingers felt thick and clumsy as he dialed the state police. The dispatcher kept questioning his requests. Yes, he really did need two crime scene teams. Yes, the second one was to go to the Round Top to look for evidence that Travis Monteith's weekend of drunken partying had taken a nasty turn in cabin seven. He couldn't blame her—she was probably incredulous that any cop could be stupid enough to see evidence of a two-hundred-pound corpse dragged through the snow and mistake it for the signs of a kidnapped statue.

Frank hung up and put his hand on Joseph's shoulder.

He had the statue back, safe and sound. But where was the joy?



Frank watched the choir, clad in down jackets instead of robes, file out of the church and onto the green for the Christmas Eve carol sing. He had a good view of the Nativity. The tourists had all gone home; this event was for Trout Run only. Earl and his girlfriend of the moment held hands. Bucky Reinholz beamed. The Haney kids stood together right up front, Derek in the middle, sheltered by the others.

"Doesn't it make you happy to see those kids together?" Ardyth appeared at his side. "After all Danielle went through to keep them out of foster care."

"You and Bob did a great thing, agreeing to help Danielle so that Social Services would let them keep living together at their house."

"You can share in the credit, Frank. Somehow you made those social workers believe that not reporting Greg's heart attack was perfectly rational."

"Maybe not rational, but not crazy." Frank caught sight of Myrna, almost unrecognizable with a smile on her face. He thought again of what she'd said three weeks before in the church office: "No one really needs a chainsaw Joseph." He'd agreed with her at the time, and now, happily, he understood they'd both been entirely wrong. The Haney kids had had another outlandish task for Joseph, and he, no stranger to extraordinary requests, had accepted it.

And now Joseph was back with his family. Frank knew he was being sentimental, but he thought Mary looked relieved, grateful that her protector had returned.

The choir began to sing, running through all the old standards. "Joy to the World," "Hark the Herald Angels Sing," "We Three Kings." Frank hunched his shoulders as the wind picked up. He'd listen to one or two more, then head home.

"Away in a Manger," "Silent Night." Frank turned toward his truck as Bob's voice rang out over the green.

"We have one more carol that the choir has learned especially for tonight's performance. It's a German carol from the fourteenth century, not very often performed anymore."

Frank smiled and kept walking. The choir director must've been thrilled when Bob came up with this one.

And then the music stopped him, the words flowing across the green and carried by the breeze into the starry night:

*"Joseph Dearest, Joseph Mine,
Help me cradle the child divine;
God reward thee and All that's thine
In paradise,"*

So prays the mother Mary. ♣

THE VOICE AT THE BARBICAN GATE

ERIC RUTTER

Old Tom Wainwright paused in his whittling and listened. He'd thought he heard something. But no, it was as quiet as one would expect it to be at this time of night, even in a castle as crowded as this one.

He sighed and stretched his aching neck. Brushing the wood shavings off his lap, he stood painfully and walked to the far edge of the wall. Nothing stirred in the courtyard below. The men were all asleep, most lying crowded beneath the lean-tos that had been built to shelter them, but some lying out in the open, right where they'd dropped, exhausted, when the day's attack finally ebbed. No harm in it, he supposed sympathetically. Small chance they'd get rained on; it had scarcely rained at all this summer. Although contrarily, a cloying mist had settled over everything tonight, making the night air thick and obscuring the farther sections of the yard in a white murk. But it didn't seem to be bothering the men.

Tom turned and walked back to his stool at the outer edge of the wall. He paused to gaze out through a gap in the battlements. Nothing stirred in the empty field that had been a battlefield this afternoon—at least as far as he could discern. Between the mist and his failing eyesight, he couldn't see any sign of the village, not even any sparks of campfires ringing it. A few must be there, struggling to burn in the wet night air. There always were; not all of the enemy could fit into the homes and other structures of Hawleyshire. For the hundredth time he imagined some enemy soldier sleeping in his own bed right now, as one must have done every night for all these past five weeks of the siege. He and his fellow defenders of the castle, meanwhile, slept crowded in barracks and storerooms and, indeed, sprawled on the bare earth itself.

He looked up and down the wall on which he stood, noting the shadows of sleeping forms and one other sentry, a guardsman pacing slowly a fair distance away. Tom was about to sit down when suddenly he heard the noise again. He recognized it now—the



scuff of a footstep on bare earth. It came from down below, outside the castle wall. He leaned out and squinted into the haze. At first he saw nothing, then dimly he perceived movement, a man-shaped shadow in the mist at the base of the wall.

Quickly he pulled his head back. The man below might have a crossbow, come in the small hours to pick off unwary sentries. Tom listened as the man's measured footsteps drew nearer, surprisingly clear despite the thickness of the night air and the height of the wall, almost twenty feet tall here by the barbican gate.

Then the footsteps stopped.

"Can't sleep, old-timer?" a man's voice called up.

So he'd spotted him. Tom didn't answer.

"Can't blame you," the man continued, not shouting, just speaking loud enough to be heard. His tone was casual. "If I was going to die as soon as you, I wouldn't want to waste my time sleeping either."

Tom smirked. This kind of banter occurred every night somewhere along the wall, the attackers trying to sow fear among the defenders with lies and rumors and threats. This fellow didn't seem very good at it. Presumably he'd meant Tom was going to die soon at the point of a sword. That wasn't the meaning his statement conveyed, not to a fifty-five-year-old man in poor health.

"Actually, I just came to empty a chamber pot," Tom replied, matching the man's tone. "Watch your head!"

He listened hopefully for the sound of feet scuffling quickly to one side, but the man below merely chuckled. "You should save it. You'll be drinking piss before this siege is over. The castle well can't hold out with this drought."

Tom opened his mouth to reply but stopped. He'd been about to say the well was holding out just fine, but disclosing information about conditions inside the castle was strictly forbidden, on orders from Baron Bradburn himself. Maybe the fellow below was better at this type of banter than he'd thought.

Into the silence the man said, "Throat's too dry to talk already, eh? Too bad. You should give up. Save yourself, and your family."

Tom said, "Right, I'll just pop down and open the gate, shall I? I'm sure you and the rest of the king's men would welcome us all back into the fold, no hard feelings. What does King Henry care about a little rebellion?"

"You don't have to open the gate," the man said, his tone peculiar. "We're already inside. We've got one of ours in there right now . . ."

He let his statement hang in the air, unfinished. It rang in Tom's ears, full of ominous promise. Before Tom could frame a response,

the footsteps resumed. They proceeded at the same leisurely pace, headed to Tom's right, past the barbican gate, and onward. Tom poked his head out to look, but the man was lost in the mist. His footsteps receded into silence.

Tom returned to his stool and sat down. The man's parting remark stayed with him for a while—it and its unsettling tone of assurance—but eventually he managed to dismiss it. Late-night visitors had threatened far worse these past few weeks. Several called up to watchmen and said a saboteur had snuck into the castle somehow and poisoned the well. They lied. Several more promised a ballista was on its way from London, along with more royal troops. Neither ever arrived. No reason to put any stock in this last fellow's promises or the stories others like him told about what was happening at Kenilworth Castle, where other rebellious barons were besieged by troops led by King Henry himself. Although, admittedly, there was the ring of truth to the most recent stories offered up by the taunters here at Colstock Castle. They said the Archbishop of Canterbury stood below the wall at Kenilworth and excommunicated everyone inside. They said he was coming to Colstock next.

Tom leaned back against the wall behind him and rubbed his tired eyes. He judged it was another few hours to sunrise. It had been a long day. He kept his eyes closed as he reflected on it, remembering what it was like up here on the wall this afternoon. He hadn't been called upon to participate in the fighting, thank God—they weren't so desperate as that just yet—but he did help carry down the dead and wounded. The images flashed in his mind as he dozed: the press of bodies atop the wall, sweaty men shoving and shouting around him, his back and legs aching, sweat streaming down his face, the whisk of arrows flashing overhead, the roiling stench of smoke and blood and sweat and shit, the glint of sunlight on a cauldron full of boiling water as it was tipped over the edge of the wall, the steam rising from the water as it arced down on the attackers below, the hiss of scalding flesh a moment later, the screams of agony. Footsteps, footsteps on the wall-walk, coming near him . . .

He opened his eyes to a gray horizon. A man was walking toward him along the wall, dressed in armor and a maroon surcoat bearing the baron's crest. It took Tom a moment to recognize Nathan, Sefton Miller's boy, a member of the castle guard.

Tom stood to meet him. His bones ached even worse than usual. Served him right for sleeping at his post, he thought harshly.

Nathan stopped before him. His face was grave. "Tom," he said in greeting.

"What is it?" Tom asked sheepishly. He felt like an old fool, sleeping while on watch. He fought the urge to look behind him, suddenly afraid he'd slept through another attack. Of course he hadn't. It was too quiet.

"I need you to come with me," Nathan said.

"Why?"

"It's your grandson, Dunstan."

Dunstan—he was another member of the castle guard. "What of him?"

"I'm sorry . . . He's dead."

A cold shock lanced through him. "Dead? How? Has there been fighting?"

"No. I . . . He was murdered."

Tom put a hand to the wall to steady himself. Reflexively he muttered a brief prayer. Then he said, "Take me to him."

Dunstan's body had been laid out in the barracks in the middle bailey. The first floor of the long stone building had been converted to a hospital for the siege. Nathan led Tom past straw pallets occupied by wounded men, most of them still asleep. A curtain was drawn across the far end of the room. Behind it lay the dead.

Dunstan's family stood huddled over his body—his wife Hannah, their baby daughter, his parents, hers. They all looked up as Nathan pulled the curtain aside. Hannah gave a little cry at the sight of Old Tom, then she resumed sobbing into her hand. Dunstan's father, Young Tom, put a hand on her shoulder as he moved past her to meet Old Tom.

"Thanks, Nathan," Young Tom said.

Nathan nodded in response. "I'll be just out here." He stepped back, letting the curtain fall closed behind him.

Old Tom gripped his eldest son's arm. "I'm sorry," he said.

Young Tom just nodded. Dunstan wasn't the first son he'd lost, or even the first he'd lost in this war; his oldest, Hyatt, died last year at Evesham with Simon de Montfort, the earl who originally led the barons' rebellion. It was a pain Old Tom knew too well. As a young man he lost two sons in one year to fever. It seemed like yesterday.

Together he and Young Tom moved to the bedside. Dunstan was covered to the neck by a shroud. His face was gray, his expression drawn. Old Tom offered his condolences to the others, said quietly what a good man his grandson had been. The rest nodded, not taking their eyes off Dunstan's pale face.

"How did it happen?" Old Tom asked finally.

"They won't tell us," Young Tom said. His face showed simmering anger.

Hannah's father, Gregory, said, "They say the captain of the guard will explain. He's on his way here."

Tom digested this, or tried to. It didn't make any sense. Then again, neither did a murder inside a besieged castle. The enemy was supposed to be outside.

He sat down to wait. He didn't have to wait for long—it was only a few minutes later when Nathan pulled the curtain aside. "You men," he said. "Come with me."

Wordlessly, Old Tom, Young Tom, and Gregory followed Nathan to the second floor. In their eagerness for the meeting ahead, Young Tom and Gregory matched Nathan's brisk pace. Old Tom quickly fell behind, slowed by his stiff back and legs. He refused to call out to them as he labored up the stairs. More and more since he'd handed over the wagon-making business to Young Tom a year ago, the whole family treated him like a dodderer. He didn't feel he had the right to resent a supporting hand on his arm sometimes and resent its absence at others.

He topped the stairs in time to see Nathan ushering the two younger men into a room at the end of the corridor. He was nearing that door when he heard a strident voice beyond it say, "Stand guard without." Nathan promptly stepped out again—and nearly collided with him. He stepped aside sheepishly to let him pass.

All eyes turned to Old Tom as he entered the room. He felt the gaze of Selwyn, captain of the castle guard, most of all. Mustached, near forty, Selwyn sat behind a table to one side, glaring at him. His maroon surcoat, stretched taut over a chain mail shirt and sizeable paunch, was soiled with hard use. As Tom moved to stand behind his son and Gregory, shooing them back into the chairs they guiltily started to rise from, he struggled to recall if he'd ever actually spoken to the guard captain. He didn't know. He was much better acquainted with the younger fellow who stood beside and a step behind Selwyn's chair, dressed in a simple black robe, hands folded before him: Father Rowan, the parish priest.

"Which one of you is Dunstan Wainwright's father?" Selwyn asked bluntly.

"I am," Young Tom said.

Selwyn focused on him. "There has been treachery in the castle. Last night your son was slain. So was Baron Bradburn."

Old Tom, his son, and his son-in-law all gasped in unison. He put a hand on Young Tom's shoulder—not to comfort him, but to steady himself. The room had lurched at the news.

"What happened?" he heard Young Tom ask.

"Your son attacked the baron."

"What? No!" Young Tom rose halfway out of his chair.

"Be quiet!" Selwyn snapped. "Sit down."

Young Tom hesitated. Old Tom was too bewildered to decide if he should remove his hand from his son's shoulder or use it to gently push him back down into his seat. After another moment, Young Tom sat of his own accord.

"It's quite clear what happened," Selwyn said. "Dunstan was standing guard outside the baron's study last night. They were both found dead inside this morning. The baron was slain by a sword, Dunstan by a dagger. Dunstan lay with a bloody sword in his hand, his own sword by all accounts. The baron held a dagger, bloodied too. Clearly Dunstan entered the room and attacked the baron, and the baron fought back with what weapon lay to hand. Each killed the other."

"Why?" Gregory said, baffled. "Why would Dunstan do such a thing?"

"That is the question you are here to answer."

"My son is no traitor," Young Tom growled. "He did not betray his lord."

"Then he never said to you he wished the siege were over? That he wished the baron would surrender?"

"No."

The guard captain stared hard at him. Young Tom stared back. Selwyn then turned his gaze to Gregory.

"No," Gregory said.

Selwyn looked up at Old Tom. Tom shook his head.

"We will ask his wife next," Selwyn said, looking back to Young Tom. "And his friends here in the castle. We will have the truth."

"We've told you the truth!" Young Tom shouted.

"Keep your voice down! Word of this is not to travel beyond this room. Do you understand?"

Young Tom and Gregory muttered their agreement. Old Tom barely heard. He was still struggling to accept what had happened.

The baron was dead.

Selwyn started to say something else. Old Tom didn't hear. In a daze, he turned and wandered toward the open window to one side. His grandson a traitor . . . No. It wasn't true. Just a moment's thought showed the absurdity of it. Still, he worried for what the captain's inquiries might reveal. Wishful talk of the baron surrendering was common now among the villagers here in the castle. He guessed it would be less common among the baron's men-at-arms, but surely it wasn't unheard of. They were still human, after

all. Dunstan might have had such thoughts. He might have confided them to one of his fellows.

Tom pressed the palms of his hands against the cool stone of the windowsill. It had been a long five weeks. When the barons' rebellion began three years ago, the decision had been easy for him and the other inhabitants of Hawleyshire. Henry might be king, but Baron Bradburn was their lord; protector, and provider. Better to rebel against a distant monarch than the man whose castle cast its shadow over one's home. But now the tide had turned. Simon de Montfort was dead, the last of the rebel barons were besieged at Kenilworth, Ely, and here at Colstock, and there was no sign of the support from France Montfort's son was supposed to be gathering.

Five weeks ago, when Baron Bradburn ordered the villagers to evacuate their homes and join him in the castle in preparation for a siege, they gladly obeyed. Everyone knew besieging armies often razed surrounding farmlands and orchards and even entire villages to devalue their enemy's holdings and deny him support and supplies. As part of the baron's holding themselves, the local serfs knew they might well be slaughtered by the king's men outright. Even so, as the weeks crawled by, Colstock Castle had come to seem less like a refuge and more like a prison. The villagers feared that the fate they had escaped was still waiting for them outside. Increasingly, they believed their lord had the power to save them from it through negotiation and surrender.

Maybe that would happen now that the baron was dead. Old Tom thought of the baron's oldest son, Edgar. He would inherit the family title, as well as Colstock Castle, its vassals, and environs. He was fifteen years old.

A new voice was talking behind him. It was Father Rowan. "These past weeks have been a difficult time for us all. But I'm afraid we must accept the possibility that none of us knew what was in Dunstan's heart."

Young Tom quickly and angrily objected. Old Tom stayed where he was. Suddenly he felt very old. Gazing out the window, he saw that the sun had come up. The castle's inhabitants were up with it. Everywhere people were going about the business of living. His weak eyes could make out men and women lighting cook-fires, snapping bed linens, collecting eggs and chickens from the coops built along the south wall. He watched a woman atop that wall empty a chamber pot into the dry moat, as he had threatened to do last night when talking to the man at the barbican gate.

His thoughts jerked to a halt.

"Who's to say someone else didn't attack the both of them?" Gregory was saying in a reasonable tone.

"I am," Selwyn said. "I've been a soldier long enough. I know how to read wounds."

Old Tom turned around. "Someone snuck in from outside."

Everyone turned to look at him. "What?" said Gregory.

"I was on watch down at the barbican gate last night. A man came up to the wall. He said they had a man inside."

Young Tom's expression was blank. Gregory gave Old Tom a look he recognized: It was the one he wore anytime he thought age was addling Old Tom's wits.

Selwyn's face twisted with contempt. He dismissed the idea with two words: "Wall talk."

Young Tom rounded on him. "How do you know it isn't true?"

"This place has been sealed up tighter than a nun's cunt for five weeks. No one snuck in."

Old Tom looked at Father Rowan pleadingly. "My grandson didn't do this."

Father Rowan was frowning. "If someone could enter the castle unseen, why would they not open a gate and let in their compatriots? As I understand it, that is the preferred tactic in a siege."

"It is," Selwyn said.

Old Tom didn't have an answer.

"My son was no traitor," Young Tom said again.

Old Tom was still looking at Father Rowan. "You won't give him a Christian burial, will you? If you believe he was a murderer."

The look in Father Rowan's eyes was answer enough.

Young Tom muttered a curse into the silence.

"Will you investigate?" Old Tom asked. "To see if it was someone from outside?" His gaze shifted between Father Rowan and Selwyn.

Selwyn said, "We know what happened."

Old Tom set his jaw. "Then I will."

At mid morning Edgar Hawley, twenty-first baron of Bradburn, addressed the inhabitants of Colstock Castle from the ramparts above the middle bailey. Old Tom listened from a place at the back of the crowd. A sizeable crowd it was, consisting of the two hundred men, women, and children from the village; the members of the castle garrison; and those of the baron's servants who did not stand behind him atop the wall along with his family, knights, and retainers—perhaps three hundred and fifty souls in all, standing shoulder to shoulder in the yard. They strained to hear the young baron's words. They gasped when he announced his father was dead.

Tom was surprised when the new baron made no mention of the

manner of his father's death. Surprised but also relieved—perhaps, he thought, the baron doubted Selwyn's version of events. Hope fluttered in his breast for a moment, but then he thought it through. He could imagine the baron's counselors arguing to keep the truth a secret. Whether the villagers believed that Dunstan committed the murder or that someone snuck in from outside, the effect would be the same: All sense of security would be lost. Those who already grumbled for an end to the siege would shout for it.

And indeed, no sooner had the gasps and murmurs died down than someone in the crowd yelled "Surrender!" Several others echoed the cry. The young baron held up his hands for silence. He assured the crowd he was conferring with his counselors to decide on the best course of action. For now, he said, they would all remain "safe within the castle walls." He offered a few more platitudes. Then he turned and headed back toward the keep, with his advisors and knights in tow.

Tom stood there thinking as the crowd around him dispersed. He had no idea if Edgar shared his father's commitment to the rebel cause. Perhaps he did not. Even if he did, it was now quite clear it was a losing cause. He—or rather, his counselors—might see his father's death as the perfect opportunity to abandon it. But would they be so eager to surrender to the forces outside if those forces had murdered the old baron?

Clearly there was more at stake in proving Dunstan's innocence. That task was still before him, and he still didn't know how to begin. As he began to walk back toward the hospital, he wondered how a purblind old wagon-builder like him was supposed to solve such a mystery. It had been decades since he was a soldier. Even then he had never participated in a siege. He knew very little of castles despite having lived next to one his entire life.

But then, he did know a little. And during these past five weeks he'd overheard plenty of conversations between the soldiers. What did they worry about when they thought of someone sneaking in undetected?

The idea burst into his mind like an inspiration: a tunnel. That was what the defenders feared the most. If someone had managed to dig a tunnel, he had only to find it to prove Dunstan's innocence.

He considered the idea. Like nearly all castles, Colstock was situated atop a hill. But unlike the castles being built nowadays, Colstock was not a series of circular walls, each enclosing the next. Instead it was laid out like links in a chain. The easternmost link, the inner bailey with its keep and the critical well, sat at the very top of the hill. The only way into it was through the middle bailey, which could only be entered through the outer bailey. Gates

in the massive stone walls connected the baileys, each one heavily fortified with an iron portcullis and thick doors of iron-banded oak. The gate leading into the outer bailey from outside the castle was fortified even more heavily, so much so that the entire structure practically comprised a bailey unto itself. It was the barbican, with a drawbridge and a south-facing tower and the most massive walls of all, no less than eighteen feet thick.

The River Wylde guarded the castle's north flank, running so close along that side its current lapped against the base of the wall—a convenience which had inspired the building of a latrine atop the wall of the inner bailey, hanging out over the river. On the south flank of the castle a broad moat had been dug. It joined the river on the castle's east and west sides, creating a twenty-foot-wide tributary. So effective a defense was this moat that the attackers had been forced to address it first of all. They spent the first week of the siege damming the inflow of water from the east, then filling in the drained moat with dirt and stones at a few strategic places.

The ground on the river side of the castle was solid shale, Tom recalled. Digging a tunnel there would be arduous work, even with the river running at drought level and more ground than usual exposed. But on the moat side there was soft earth. Mining was possible there—and not just possible, but feared by the garrison. Several times during the siege, when the defenders' suspicions were aroused by a knot of attackers staying out of sight for too long behind a makeshift barricade in the dry moat, pans of water were laid along the base of the wall. Guardsmen knelt over the pans, watching intently for ripples that would indicate digging underground. If a burgeoning tunnel should be found, they stood ready to sink their own shaft and take the fight to the men down below. But they never found one. Ironically, Tom now dared to hope they had simply missed it.

But how to find it? He could think of no better method than to walk the full length of each wall, looking for any signs of weakness or, more realistically, trusting his weight to collapse any hidden trapdoor.

So he went to the barbican, picked a spot at random, and started pacing. Slowly and methodically he made a full circuit around the base of the wall. The ground seemed solid with each step. Nowhere did he see any sign of digging.

He moved on to the outer bailey. His task was harder here, this courtyard being larger and more crowded than the first. But he took just as much care walking the wall's perimeter, ignoring the grumblings and the odd looks of those he disturbed. Still he saw no sign of a tunnel.

Noon came and went as he walked around the middle and inner baileys in turn. He remained deliberate and thorough. When the way was blocked by structures built along the wall, he did not go around them—he went inside, crawling in every chicken coop, turning over every pallet laid down in the lean-tos, pacing the stone floor of every outbuilding built against the south curtain wall.

He found nothing.

Late that afternoon, bone tired and aching in every joint, he returned to the barbican. He climbed up onto the ramparts and stared myopically at the distant village, trying to think. The day was proving to be a quiet one, the besiegers having assayed no attack. Perhaps they were still recovering from the wounds they suffered during yesterday's fighting. Or perhaps they knew that a different kind of turmoil gripped the castle today.

Gazing miserably at the blurry village, he felt wholly unsuited for the task he'd undertaken. He needed help, someone who knew castles better, perhaps a soldier from the garrison. On impulse he looked around. Among the others with him atop the wall, a man in armor stood a short distance away. Like Tom, he was staring at the village in contemplative silence. He was young, bareheaded, with long blond hair and a matching mustache. The quality of his armor and the sword at his belt marked him as one of Baron Bradburn's knights.

Without thinking, Tom walked up to the man. "I need your help," he said bluntly. When the knight turned cool blue eyes upon him, he belatedly added, "Sir."

The knight regarded him without emotion. When he spoke it was with a French accent. "What is it?"

"My name is Tom Wainwright. I am Dunstan Wainwright's grandfather."

Tom saw recognition in the knight's eyes. He looked for anger there, any sign the knight was annoyed to speak with a relative of the man blamed for the baron's death. But he saw none. The knight simply said, "I am Sir Geraint d'Auvergne."

"I think someone—" Tom stopped to reorder his thoughts. "If the king's men have managed to dig a tunnel into the castle, where would it be?"

"If they managed to dig a tunnel, one of the walls would have collapsed by now."

Tom blinked, confused. "Why?"

"The purpose of mining is to bring down walls. The miners dig a tunnel under a section of wall, and as they dig they shore up the tunnel roof with timbers. Then, when the tunnel is large enough, they fill it with brushwood and light the wood on fire. Often they'll

put some pig carcasses in there too. The fat helps the fire burn. When the timbers burn, they collapse, and so does the tunnel roof and the section of wall above it. Then the attackers rush in."

Tom thought about this. "So if someone wanted to sneak in here, undetected, how would they do it?"

"They would probably try to bribe a guard into unlocking a sally port. But there's been no chance for that here. All the gates have been shut night and day since the siege began."

"You say that as if they didn't need to be."

"Here they do. But some sieges are different. Sometimes the besieging army stays to its camp, so the castle gates remain open, with people coming and going as they please and life almost normal for those inside. Other times the gates are left open just as a sign of defiance, until there is an attack. But here the gates have been closed. So King Henry's men haven't had the chance to buy off any guards."

"So if they wanted to sneak in . . . ?"

Sir Geraint shrugged in his armor. "All they could hope for is to find a section of wall unguarded at night and have a few men scale it with ladders. No easy task, getting up and over a wall without being seen, even at night. And then they'd have to get to a sally port unseen and get it open." He shook his head. "Not easy. But perhaps."

Tom frowned. What Sir Geraint was saying seemed to support Father Rowan's idea, that those who snuck into besieged castles did so not to murder the castle's lord, but to open a gate and let in reinforcements. "So how are most castles won?" he asked.

"Starvation. If you have the time, you starve them out. If you don't, you try to sneak in and open a gate. Or fight your way over the walls, like our friends outside tried to do yesterday. Although that is a costly tactic. You pay in lives." Sir Geraint showed him a cold smile. "Apparently Lord Huxley feels he can afford it."

Lord Ian Huxley was the noble in charge of the attacking forces. It was he who sent waves of men against the walls yesterday. Tom nodded quickly, discomfited by Sir Geraint's callousness. Sir Geraint smiled a bit broader, amused by his distaste.

Tom's stomach twisted. This man, this *knight* . . . he was nothing but a cold-blooded mercenary. His accent marked him as a foreigner, so he could only have been hired by the old baron, not knighted by him. In other words, his loyalty was to the baron's purse, not his cause. Maybe that loyalty followed the purse into young Edgar's hands. Maybe it didn't. By all rights, he and the others like him should be suspected of Baron Bradburn's death before homegrown boys like Dunstan.

Tom hoped no sign of his thoughts showed on his face. Standing before this Frenchman, he was struck again by the old irony of this war—in a rebellion spurred by the English barons' outrage over foreign influence in King Henry's court, the barons hired foreign knights to fight for them, and allowed themselves to be led by Simon de Montfort, a Frenchman by birth.

Tom wondered if Sir Geraint had guessed—if he even cared—that he was trying to clear Dunstan's name. "Thank you for your help," he said.

Sir Geraint gave him a slight nod and turned back to his study of the distant village. Tom walked away.

After a subdued supper with his family, Tom resumed his investigation. His conversation with Sir Geraint had at least given him one idea: He would inspect the sally ports.

Designed as emergency exits for use during an escape or sortie, the sally ports served as portals of convenience in peacetime. There were three of them, one in each bailey. Each was a gate just large enough to admit a man on horseback, closed by a simple but strong wooden door. Tom discovered the one in the outer bailey was blocked by a boulder that was so large he judged it would take a team of half a dozen horses to shift it. The one in the middle bailey was simply locked but heavily guarded, as he learned from discreet inquiries among the villagers who camped nearby. The one in the inner bailey was blocked by a boulder even larger than the one in the outer bailey.

Once again he was stymied. In the growing twilight, he stood and looked around the yard, searching for some sign of . . . anything. Soldiers and villagers were about their business, carrying buckets, herding children, talking in twos and threes. Across the way, a couple of chickens were scratching in the earth, parched dry again by another rainless day. The sentries atop the west wall stood motionless, black silhouettes against a blooded sky.

He was out of ideas.

A pair of soldiers was walking by. Tom intercepted them. "Where is Nathan Miller?" he asked.

"On watch at the middle gate," one said.

Tom thanked the man and headed that way.

The day's exertions had taken their toll. He was bone weary, his whole body aching as he walked to the middle gate. The climb up the steps to the wall-walk was so taxing he had to stand for a moment and collect his strength once he reached the top. Noticing him, a guard came over to inquire after his health. Tom asked him for Nathan.

Nathan arrived a moment later. "I need your help," Tom said without preamble. "I need to see where Dunstan died."

"What? Why?"

"Maybe there's something there, some sign of what really happened."

Nathan shook his head. "Civilians aren't allowed in the keep, let alone in the baron's private chambers."

"Please, Nathan." Weakly, Tom grasped his arm. "There's nothing else. I can't let them blame him. I can't let them bury my grandson in a murderer's grave."

Nathan frowned.

"You don't believe he did it, do you?" Tom pressed.

"No."

He watched conflicting emotions flicker across Nathan's face. "Please."

For another long moment, Nathan stood there considering. Finally, he turned to another guard standing a few paces away. "Godwin, cover for me. I'll be back."

Tom almost wept with relief as Nathan led him down the steps and back up into the inner bailey. Just that quickly his aches and fatigue were gone; he kept up with Nathan's brisk stride without thinking. "Thank you, thank you," he said.

"The baron and his family are in the chapel," Nathan said. "They're having the funeral service tonight. The knights and the counselors will be in there too. So now is about our only chance to get inside the baron's study."

Tom followed him past the front of the keep. Residence of the baron and his family, last refuge for the defenders should the king's men break in, the keep loomed blocky and dour in the evening light. In passing, Tom glanced up the flimsy wooden staircase that led to the main door, where two soldiers stood on guard. The stairs really were as rickety as they looked. It was part of the keep's design: The stairs were made to be chopped away easily by defenders above. A few blows from an axe and attackers at ground level would be faced with a windowless stone wall sixteen feet thick. Beyond that wall lay only cellars and storerooms, all that occupied the ground floor. The living quarters were on the second and third floors. Tom looked up at the few thin windows there, aglow with yellow candlelight.

Nathan led him across the yard and up a stone staircase to the wall-walk. The guards there didn't challenge them as they made their way to a wooden door in the keep's east side. Tom was surprised to discover no guard standing there. He was even more surprised when the door handle turned unlocked under Nathan's hand.

"This deep in the castle, we figure we'll have plenty of warning to lock up," Nathan said in response to Tom's stare. "The river runs so close on this side, there isn't even room down below to stand a siege ladder. Anyone coming in would have to come all the way across the yard."

Inside the keep, Tom paused to consider the brackets on the door where a thick bar could be set. The bar itself stood on end beside the door. Judging by the cobwebs strung between it and the wall, it had been there for some time.

He followed Nathan up a flight of steps to the third floor, then down a narrow corridor. They encountered two servants along the way but only one guard; the latter's pace, slow and purposeless, marked him as a man on patrol. The guard eyed them both deliberately—Tom guessed they were the most interesting thing he had seen in an hour—but he made no move to stop them.

Moments later Nathan stopped at another plain wooden door. "This is it," he said. "This was the baron's study. Dun was killed right here." He pointed down at the floor.

Tom looked down. A cold feeling seeped through him as he looked at the spot.

Nathan opened the door. The room beyond was dark. He took a candle from a bracket on the wall and handed it to Tom. Cautiously Tom stepped inside.

There was a broad wooden table in the center of the room with the dark abyss of an empty fireplace in the wall behind it. A couple of chairs and cabinets were the room's only other furnishings. There was one window, narrow and shuttered, in what Tom quickly reckoned to be the north wall. He headed there first.

The window was just an arrow slit, too narrow to admit a man, even if one could somehow reach this height. With the river running directly below, Tom couldn't imagine how that could be accomplished. Still, he examined the windowsill and the shutters for any signs of tampering. Then he turned back to the room.

A portrait frowned down at him from the wall beside the door, some stern patriarch with a noticeable Hawley family resemblance. A tapestry depicting a rural scene adorned another wall. The table in the center of the room was bare save for a quill and a pot of ink. Entirely bare were the tops of the cabinets and the mantelpiece. There were no ledgers or parchments or scrolls, the sorts of things Tom would have expected to find in a baron's study. Absent too were any personal articles. There were no slippers by the chairs, no wine cup, no castoff jewelry or keys lying about, nothing at all.

"This room has been cleaned," he said. His voice sounded loud in his ears.

Nathan glanced away from the door, which he held open a crack. "Yes. Thoroughly. There was a lot of blood."

Unhappily, Tom knelt down and examined the floor. He saw no sign of blood; the servants had done a good job. They must have scrubbed the stones clean before laying down fresh rushes. And they were certainly fresh, hardly wilted at all.

He scanned the floor thoroughly, working his way around the table and back to the door. It was only on the doorjamb that he saw any sort of grime. At first he thought the smudge was a bit of dried mud, but closer examination revealed it to be dung. No great discovery, that. Anyone who walked in the baileys was likely to track dung about. Between spillage from chamber pots and droppings from livestock milling about the yard, every floor in the castle was prone to such leavings. No doubt this smudge was missed only because of its curious location, about waist high on the door frame.

Tom straightened up again even as Nathan said, "We mustn't dawdle here."

Tom nodded. He made another quick circuit of the room, examining all surfaces by the light of the candle, double-checking the windowsill for anything suspicious, even daring to open a few cabinet drawers, which proved to be empty. There was nothing. Worse than that, he still didn't know what he was looking for.

"We have to go," Nathan said. "Tom?"

"All right."

He returned to the door. Nathan led him out.

"I didn't find anything," he said to Nathan's back as they walked down the corridor.

"I didn't think you would."

They descended the stairs in silence.

Once they were back out on the wall, Tom waited as Nathan closed the door behind them. Then he asked, "What do you think happened?"

Nathan looked at him for a moment. Then he looked past him, to see if anyone else was in earshot. "In truth? I think one of the knights got tired of this war."

Tom nodded grimly. He wasn't surprised Nathan shared his opinion of knights. Most commoners did. Just to see the knights earlier today, standing behind the young baron on top of the wall, they'd reminded him of nothing so much as a pack of wolves. "Anyone in particular?"

"I'd trust any of them to do it. And Dun would have let any of them pass."

Tom wondered if the knights would benefit from a surrender

now that the man who hired them was dead. He couldn't imagine. He didn't know enough about politics.

Tom turned and walked over to the outer edge of the wall. Down below, the river lapped softly in the dusk. The effects of the drought were evident: The glint of moonlight on the water showed that the river had pulled away slightly from the base of the wall. There still wasn't room enough for someone to set up a ladder, but a man could walk on dry ground between the river and the wall now. Tom thought of the unlocked door behind them. Maybe there were enough potential killers inside the castle, but it would be so easy for an invader to get into the keep, if only he could get past the wall.

Standing beside him, Nathan misread his thoughts. "God won't keep Dun out of heaven for someone else's crime," he said.

The statement made Tom remember his pain. "I hope you're right."

Tom woke just a few hours after collapsing onto his pallet. He lay there for an interminable time, caught between sleep and waking, his limbs heavy with fatigue but his mind active and restless. He ran over the events of the day, searching for insight. Ironically, he felt as if he now knew even less than when he first started his investigation.

With his thoughts running in circles, he began to feel as if he'd lain there for an eternity, with dawn another eternity away. The only way to break the spell was to get out of bed, so he did. He'd fallen asleep in his clothes, boots and all. Silently he slipped out of the dormitory he shared with his and a dozen other families.

The warm night air was heavy and still. Stars glittered overhead and long luminescent clouds slid across the face of the gibbous moon. Without deliberately choosing a direction, he started to walk.

It was only after he passed through the gate to the inner bailey that he noticed where his feet had taken him. He stopped and looked around. The keep was a towering shape on one side, the yard was deserted, and the guards atop the walls were motionless, most seated and doubtless dozing. One man on the north wall stood gazing down at him with casual interest. Tom turned and headed that way.

The guard greeted him with a smile when he topped the stairs to the wall-walk. "Can't sleep?" he asked.

"No," Tom said, reminded of his conversation with the man outside the barbican gate . . . Was it only yesterday? It seemed a lifetime ago. "Looks like I'm the only one."

"Indeed."

Tom looked past him to the keep. Its windows were shuttered despite the night's warmth. "Are you up here every night?"

"Most nights."

"Is it just you guards moving around at this hour?"

"Aye. And the occasional visitor to the garderobe." He hiked a thumb toward the latrine, a small stone structure hanging out over the wall between them and the keep. It was a small turret, square and peak roofed. It even had a small arrow slit high up on its near side, just visible in the moonlight.

"You mean people from the keep?" Tom asked.

The guard nodded. "Some of the servants don't have chamber pots. They come out here in their long nightshirts." He grinned mildly. "They look like ghosts floating along the wall."

Tom forced a smile. "I'm headed that way myself."

The guard stepped aside to let him pass.

Tom walked directly to the garderobe and pulled open the door. The moonlight slanting in through the arrow slit provided scant illumination, but it was enough for him to make out the interior. He surveyed the bare stone walls, the thick wooden rafters overhead, the wood seat framing the hole in the stone bench. He stepped forward and examined the seat with care. Then he looked through the hole, down at the river's moonlight-dappled surface and the narrow rocky shore between it and the wall.

And suddenly he knew.

There were noises outside, footsteps and hushed voices. He stepped back out and looked around.

The door to the keep was open. Between it and him, at a distance of about twenty paces, there stood a party of men in armor. They faced in all directions; one was watching him intently, with a hand resting on his sword hilt. Several of those behind the man were hauling on two ropes that hung down into the yard. As Tom watched, these men hoisted a long rowboat up over the side. They carried it over to the outside edge of the wall and proceeded to lower it down.

"What's going on here?" said a voice from behind him. The guard he'd spoken to a few moments ago came abreast of him, headed toward the activity.

"Keep to your post, Merritt," the guard facing them said warningly. He looked ready to draw his sword in an instant—against a fellow guard.

"Dennis?" said the guard beside Tom. "What is this?"

"Keep to your post!"

The men on the ropes were working quickly. Two of them had

already shimmied down the outside of the wall and were now untying the boat. Once freed, the ropes were promptly reeled in by the men up top, just as a second group exited the keep. They crossed to the guards and let them tie the ropes around them, then lower them down to the riverside, two by two.

The guard standing beside Tom grunted. "Coward," he said in a shocked whisper.

Tom, too, had discerned the identity of the small, hooded figure now being lowered with extra care down the outside of the wall. "God, no," he breathed. He broke into a run. "Stop! You can't!"

The guard standing between him and the young baron drew his sword in a flash. As Tom closed on him, he caught a frantic glimpse of the man's determined scowl, then one of his sword hilt as it came hurtling toward his face.

The world heaved.

Reeling points of light settled into a view of the starry night sky. Tom was lying on the wall-walk. His face was wet. When he touched it, his hand came back dark with blood.

"Edgar!" he croaked, trying to sit up. "Your father was murdered! One of the king's men killed him!"

He couldn't tell if he managed to shout the words or not. He might not have said them aloud at all. It was hard to think. There was something hovering over him, shapes blotting out parts of the sky—people. He felt hands on him, trying to lift him up or keep him down, he couldn't tell. Maybe both.

"Oh God," he moaned, wanting to cry. Darkness swept in.

Lord Ian Huxley, commander of the siege army, had converted the Hawleyshire parish church into his headquarters. It had also served as a barracks these past five weeks, just like every other roofed structure in the village. But as Tom walked up the central aisle with Father Rowan and their soldier escort, he saw little sign that men had been sleeping here, only a few bedrolls sitting on the floor, an unpaired boot lying under one pew, and a few other discarded personal effects. By midday most of the soldiers had moved their belongings into the castle and the villagers had moved theirs back into their homes. It was an awkward morning after the surrender, with soldiers and villagers passing each other in the road. But the tension led to no violence. Lord Huxley had kept his word; the villagers were allowed back into their homes unmolested. They would not be punished for the role they'd played in the defense of Colstock Castle. Even the castle garrison was to be spared.

All surrenders were not so peaceful. When King Henry was a

young man of seventeen, he personally directed the siege of Bedford Castle. Starved and exhausted after an arduous two months, Fawkes de Bréauté and his compatriots inside finally surrendered. The archbishop of Canterbury, who previously stood below the castle walls and excommunicated the inhabitants, recommunicated de Bréauté and his fellows. Then King Henry hanged them all.

Thinking of this, Tom could no longer blame young Baron Bradburn for fleeing during the night with his counselors and a few trusted bodyguards. He now understood how futile were his words for the baron last night. The boy probably would have run even harder if Tom had managed to show him the truth.

Politics be damned. Now there was only one reason for the truth to be known.

As he and Father Rowan followed their escort to the rear of the church, Father Rowan's head turned this way and that. Assessing the damage, Tom thought. The guard led them down a side corridor to a closed door. He knocked on it, then opened it at a word from inside.

A silver-haired man sat at a desk facing the door, flanked by two guards. To judge by his garb he could only be Lord Huxley.

The escort spoke from the doorway. "My lord, these men request an audience."

Tom didn't know if Lord Huxley had met Father Rowan before now, if arrangements had been made between them for possession of the church. But Lord Huxley barely glanced at Father Rowan. He was studying him instead. Tom suddenly remembered what he looked like. A glimpse in the mirror this morning showed him two black eyes and an ugly gash across the bridge of his nose. Lord Huxley must be wondering how a man even older than he was received such a wound.

Tom decided to take advantage of his interest. "It's important, milord," he said evenly.

Lord Huxley studied him a moment more. Then he waved them in. The escort backed out, closing the door behind them.

Father Rowan started to reach for a scroll that was sitting precariously on the edge of the desk but stopped himself. Belatedly Tom realized this must be his rectory they were standing in.

"What is it?" Lord Huxley asked, returning his attention to the map and various parchments spread on the desk before him.

Tom said, "I need you to tell Father Rowan the truth about how the old baron died."

Lord Huxley looked up at him again. He glanced at Father Rowan, then back at Tom's battered face. "How do you mean?"

"My grandson was standing guard outside the baron's study the night he was killed. My grandson was killed too. He has been blamed for the baron's death. If the truth isn't known, he'll be buried in an unconsecrated grave. His soul will never know peace."

Lord Huxley regarded him impassively.

"My grandson was a good man," Tom continued. "A good Christian. He doesn't deserve such a fate."

Again Lord Huxley said nothing.

Tom's gaze didn't waver. "Shall I tell you how your man got inside the castle?"

From the corner of his eye Tom saw Father Rowan's head turn in surprise. Tom hadn't told him he'd solved the puzzle. Lord Huxley looked interested too. He sat back in his chair and made a slight gesture, beckoning him to proceed. Tom glanced at the guards standing to either side of him, wondering if they should be let in on the secret. But Lord Huxley made no move to dismiss them, so Tom spoke.

"The river is running low with the drought, low enough for someone to walk along the base of the wall to a spot below the garderobe in the inner bailey. I've heard that at some castles, there is an enclosed shaft under the garderobe, with a door at the base for cleaning it out. Here your man had no such concealment, but he still had a hole in the stone bench above him, one large enough to admit a man who is slight of build.

"In the wood surrounding the hole there are fresh gouges where your assassin's grappling hook bit. I suspect there are more marks in the rafters above. Even a small man wouldn't have been able to climb up through the hole if a grapple was blocking part of it. So I expect he carried a second grapple and line, to toss up into the rafters and climb the rest of the way. I'm *sure* he carried a night-shirt, bundled up. He put it on once he squeezed through the hole. Then he walked along the wall to the keep, without raising the alarm. The guards mistook him for just another of the keep's residents out for a visit to the privy."

"Tom," Father Rowan said gently, hesitantly. "It's not possible. How would this man have made it all the way up to the baron's chambers? How would he have gained entrance to the keep?"

"The door in the keep's east wall is left unlocked. Once inside, I can only guess the assassin met no one as he climbed up to the third floor. Or at least, no one whose suspicions he aroused. Like the guards on the wall, anyone he passed might have thought he was a servant or someone else who belonged there. Either way, he *did* reach the baron's study. He attacked my grandson with a dagger he carried under his nightshirt. Then he killed the baron with my

grandson's sword. He put the weapons in their dead hands, then he fled."

"Fled where?" Father Rowan asked.

Tom looked at Lord Huxley as he replied. "The truth is, I'm not sure. He couldn't have returned to the garderobe and climbed down again because that would have meant leaving a grapple and line hanging in plain sight. Maybe he jumped off the wall, though I'm not sure the river is deep enough. More likely he hid among the villagers living in the castle. He could have walked out with the rest of us this morning."

Lord Huxley didn't say anything. Tom stood there, returning his gaze steadily.

Finally, slowly, Lord Huxley said, "You offer very little proof. Nicks in the seat of a latrine."

"I am—I was a wagon-crafter. I know wood and the marks tools make in it. I know, too, the significance of another mark, one I found on the doorframe of the baron's study. It was a smudge of dung, up high, too high to have scuffed off someone's boot. Your man must have picked it up as he squirmed through the privy hole."

"Hardly damning evidence."

"As it stands. But have a carpenter examine those nicks and I'll wager he says a grapple made them. Have a farmer look at the dung and I'll wager he says it's human, not animal. Ask the villagers if someone they didn't recognize laid out his bedroll near them the night the baron was killed."

Out of the corner of his eye, Tom noticed that Father Rowan wasn't looking at him anymore. He was looking at Lord Huxley. But Huxley was still staring at him.

Tom hardly dared to breathe. Would Lord Huxley admit the truth? Was there some political advantage in people believing the old baron was killed by one of his own men? Tom rather supposed there was. It might weaken support for the rebel barons' cause. Then again, the rebel barons had almost no supporters left. And they were all contained, under siege in just two castles now, with no sign of help coming from France. Might it not serve Lord Huxley and King Henry just as well if people believed the two of them were clever enough to sneak an assassin into the rebel castles at their pleasure?

Then Lord Huxley's expression changed, and suddenly Tom saw he'd read his thoughts all wrong. He cared nothing for the matter. He'd let Tom explain how he worked it all out just on a whim, for a momentary diversion.

Turning his attention back to his paperwork, Lord Huxley spared Father Rowan a glance. "Give the boy a proper burial," he said. ♣

A KILLING IN MIDTOWN

G. MIKI HAYDEN

Nana, Miriam's young cowife, had gotten a job as a bathroom attendant at the Stilton Hotel in midtown Manhattan. Although Kofi expressed his disapproval, warning the women of the dangers that lay abroad for young girls—and, indeed, he did seem apprehensive—the two women were quite excited about Nana's new adventure. She was told where to buy a light gray uniform with a white lace collar, and Miriam, who hemmed the skirt, told her how beautiful she looked in the outfit, which she did. Not even a uniform designed to make the wearer look like one of an endless brigade of anonymous maids could hide Nana's glow. The girl would have to wear a bucket over her head to minimize even a portion of her sparkle, concluded Miriam, who felt very proud of her adventurous cowife.

The unfortunate part of the job was the hours—four in the afternoon until midnight—actually a very good shift, Zeline, Nana's new best friend and fellow ladies' room attendant, said. Still, Miriam worried about the relatively recent immigrant from Ghana and insisted on going with their husband Kofi to the 125th Street subway station every night to wait for Nana to emerge.

Nana, irrepressible, would chatter about the interesting new job all the way home, talk about the expensive dresses the banquet guests wore, chuckle over little jokes told in the ladies' room that (as a professional) she hadn't been able to laugh over at the time, and report Zeline's advice as to how to make money.

"Zeline said to place a one dollar bill plus four quarters in the tip dish at the beginning of the night," Nana explained. That way a guest might be encouraged to put down a bill herself, thinking a dollar was the proper amount, or, in case not, she might at least leave a bill and take some change.

"Then I can slip a few bills into my pocket, and later, at my break, into my purse," Nana elaborated. "Because we're really supposed to share our tips at the end of the night, although Zeline says that's not

exactly fair, that everyone takes some dollars from the top. And Anna said we shouldn't have to split with Georgette the housekeeper, and management should also pay us by the hour." This was the first Miriam had heard the name *Anna* spoken, and she was fascinated with the thought of all these friendly women taking a moment here and there to share their knowledge with her Nana. That was nice. Moreover, Miriam was delighted by the idea that Nana might make even more money than she had been, as she seemed to be quite loaded with cash these days, a boon to them all.

Nana appeared very happy and even went for a manicure so that her nails would look appropriate to her position. "I hand them towels," she told Miriam—Kofi had long since stopped listening—"so my nails should look nice." She displayed her lovely, plump, dark brown fingers capped by a subdued pink polish for Miriam to admire. Miriam smiled.

Then, one night, Nana didn't come off the subway at her accustomed time. Kofi and Miriam waited in the cold, but the girl wasn't on the next train or the next. The couple walked down into the subway and stood outside the gates for an hour. Soon Miriam insisted they go to the other side and take the train downtown to the hotel.

Kofi balked. He had never taken the subway before, though Miriam had. So she repeated her request in such a way that he could not deny her. Who could refuse Miriam when she had her mind set on something?

Miriam had grilled Nana at the very first as to how to get to the hotel—she had wanted all the details of the job. Now her initial curiosity came in handy. She knew exactly how to travel to the Stilton. After a long wait for such a late-hour train—it was two A.M. by now—the couple easily found their way to Nana's workplace.

Kofi might be a reluctant speaker, but in her youth in Ghana, Miriam had worked for a family of white authorities and had found them jolly, so she was not shy. She went straight to the desk and explained her interest in her "daughter's" whereabouts.

The desk clerk understood and delivered a grimace. A police investigation was going on. A sudden rush of distress flooded through Miriam, body and soul. That could mean anything . . . "Yes? Yes?" she faltered.

Nana was being questioned by the officers.

Miriam was at once relieved—or at least somewhat. Nana was alive and Miriam knew the girl had done nothing wrong. Still, Miriam only had a vague sense of whether Nana was in this country legally. But the girl was all right. That was the main thing—even if they all had to return to Ghana tomorrow.

The clerk pointed the way to the workers' area of the hotel. He appeared to empathize with Miriam's concern.

Nana was in tears when they came upon her. She didn't ask why Miriam and Kofi were here, but only embraced Miriam and cried even harder. "Anna is dead," she finally announced when she'd calmed herself a little bit. "I'm the one who found her in the locker room. She was all crumpled up in the back, blood on her head."

Finally, the police let Nana go. They didn't suspect her of anything and didn't even warn the girl not to leave town. Miriam, who regularly watched a number of police shows on television, wondered why they forgot that particular line. The girl had a passport. But maybe the police realized she had strong ties to the community. Miriam liked that phrase especially.

The family took the subway home, Nana holding Miriam's hand for comfort all the way.

The next day Nana was lackluster, yet nonetheless ate a hearty morning meal of grits and yams. Kofi awoke late when only the smallest yam remained. But then, he didn't know the size of the other couple Nana had herself unthinkingly devoured, so all was well.

The two women watched Kofi as he prepared to go to the market with his wares. Miriam understood that Nana had something to say when the women were alone, since the girl seemed to be eager for their husband to leave.

"Good-bye, dear," Miriam told Kofi as he stood bundled at the door with his cart.

"Good-bye . . ." said Nana. For a second Miriam thought Nana was about to address Kofi as *Mr. Obadah*.

Miriam always wondered how Nana actually regarded her so-called husband. So-called because, of course, in a country in which plural marriages were not the norm, they had not been able to formalize their relationship in any way. Miriam, for her part, was pleased about this. Should Nana find a nice young man, she was, under the law here, free to marry. A nice young man . . . Miriam contemplated what that might constitute. A kind man, a reasonable man, a man who brought good money home . . . in other words, a man a girl without an education was unlikely to meet.

"Do you want another cup of tea?" Miriam asked Nana. Miriam had just yesterday bought teabags for ninety-nine cents. What a find.

"No, Ma'na." Nana sighed.

"Well?" Miriam asked.

"Poor Anna. She was very nice," said Nana. "Though white."

Miriam raised her eyebrows. She had never heard Nana say she disliked whites.

"I mean," said Nana, "she was Romanian. But she'd been here for a while, and her English really wasn't bad. She was all for our rights. She said we should keep our own tips and things like that. I think she believed Mr. Reyos was taking part of the tips. Zeline said no. She doesn't think he's dishonest. He never tries to get fresh." Apparently in Nana's mind getting fresh and being dishonest had similar roots. And probably, Miriam decided, they did. The girl spooned the rest of the grits onto her plate, added a little wedge of margarine, then sprinkled on some salt.

"But why would someone have killed Anna, do you think?" Miriam asked.

"Because she caused trouble? Or because she never put all her tips in the jar?" pondered Nana.

"But you and Zeline don't put your whole tip in the jar either," Miriam reminded her.

"Yes, but she kept back a lot more than we do. And she backtalked anyone who criticized her for it. She didn't deny it. I'd never admit I was putting some of the money in my purse to take home."

"Is doing so wrong?" Miriam fretted.

"Zeline and Anna said no."

"But if it caused someone to kill her?"

Nana didn't answer. "Mama, Mr. Reyos will be short a worker," Nana said instead. The girl looked up from her plate and scrunched her face expressively. Miriam waited. "Who killed her, Mama? You are very, very good at thinking through such puzzles."

If someone had killed Anna because she held back the bills from her tips, might that person also try to hurt her Nana? Miriam disliked the idea of Nana working in a dangerous situation. Could she ask the girl to quit?

"Anna's uniform—and she had already changed, so it's in her locker—will fit you well," Nana went on.

"I'm fat," said Miriam.

"You're pleasingly plump," disagreed Nana.

"I'm old," threw in Miriam. She had no intention of starting a new and arduous career at her age.

"I can train you in five minutes," Nana said. "And anything hard, I'll do myself. I'll run in and change the toilet paper in the stalls. I'll wipe everything down during my break. We don't have to actually clean the bathrooms either. They have cleaners for that." The girl had obviously thought the whole matter through, though Nana might not realize how worn out Miriam could be. "It's undercover work," added Nana. "Like on TV."

Well, she did have a point. Miriam was clever about digging out information. And she wasn't sure she wanted Nana working in

such a risky place unsupervised. Of course, Miriam liked the word "undercover" too. She thought of herself in that way sometimes—an undercover agent on the side of Good. And she loved television detective shows of all kinds. Though the police might find the killer with their forensics, they might not. Did they only try to solve the murders of the wealthy? She wasn't sure. Did they ever show detectives solving the murder of ordinary people on TV? Did they track down the killers of bathroom attendants, drugstore clerks, or black hairdressers? Or did they only care if a movie or sports star was involved? Before she even knew what she was doing, Miriam had nodded in agreement with Nana's absurd plan.

Nana had called Mr. Reyos, and the next day Miriam stood in the man's office at the Stilton Hotel. Nana, her sponsor, stood nearby. Mr. Reyos didn't invite either woman to sit.

"How is your English?" he asked the applicant first.

Miriam was very proud of her fine English, learned in a school with all British-educated instructors, but she tempered her answer to fit the situation. "Serviceable, sir."

"Since you're not an actual employee of the hotel, I don't need to see documentation," he added, without looking Miriam in the eyes.

"Yes, sir," she answered. Documentation. She hadn't thought of that. Of course she had none.

"Right, then," he said. He cast a glance in her direction now. "You work for tips. You pay whatever taxes you owe the government. You're self employed."

Before she could answer, he waved the two of them out. And that was that; Miriam was hired.

Nana set Miriam up at Anna's station near the third-floor restaurants and set down a tray of objects that women might require in the ladies' room—everything from mints, to a little sewing kit with two buttons, to safety pins, to cigarettes, to different types of items for when someone had her monthly flow. In the middle of these very sensible supplies was placed a bowl with four quarters and a dollar bill.

"You can sit down, Mama." Nana frowned, as if in deep concentration. "I'll come on my break in two hours and clean up and stuff. You don't have to do anything. Just rest." She brightened. "Then in two hours after that, we can have dinner."

The girl rushed off to her own regular station.

Miriam didn't have long to wait for her first customer, and, being Miriam, she could hardly follow Nana's orders to just rest. She found a paper towel and wiped off a streak on the mirror

while the woman went in and used the stall.

In a minute, after washing her hands, the woman went out with barely a glance at the bathroom attendant and without leaving a tip. Indeed, Miriam, in her place, would not have left a tip either. Then she recalled that Nana had said she herself doled the paper towels out to the guests for them to wipe their hands. Miriam debated the practice for a few seconds until two other visitors entered the suite. Miriam gave a tentative smile and listened to the two talking to one another about friends in common. How cheerful they sounded. Then Miriam went into the inner sanctum and wiped off the sinks.

When the first woman came out and washed her hands, Miriam handed her a towel. She smiled with conviction. Then she did the same when the second woman reappeared. Miriam immediately followed them into the other room, as if she were sure of herself, which was far from the truth. The two women primped. One then took a dollar from her purse and left it on Miriam's tip dish. A moment later, the other woman reached into her own purse and followed suit. They departed. A dollar from each! Two dollars, just like that. So what Nana said was true. These women left dollars.

But did this give Miriam any clue as to who had killed Anna? Well, perhaps. After all, the hotel was a font of dollar bills and perhaps of quarters. This job was all about the money, and the distribution of the money would be of very great importance to every bathroom attendant, male or female. On television, in fact, very often people were killed over financial schemes.

By the time Nana returned at six P.M., Miriam was sitting down in the outer area. Perhaps she wasn't as young as she used to be. She certainly wasn't accustomed to hopping up and down so much.

"Oh, Mama, you cleaned up," said Nana in disappointment. "You weren't supposed to do that." She handed Miriam a paper cup of hot tea.

"People are not so neat," said Miriam, preferring not to express her full disgust at how *unneat* they were. "But look." She let Nana peek into her pocket where she had stashed seven single dollar bills and uncounted change to shield the money from theft.

"Oh, Mama, you're the best one here. People love you."

Miriam smiled weakly and sipped at her tea. What sounded easy when others did it was a very hard job.

The door squeaked and a white visitor in a handsome beige wool suit walked in. She smiled at the two women from Ghana and went into the other room. Miriam debated getting up so she could hand the woman a towel, but she was tired. Moreover, she didn't want Nana to worry too much.

When the woman came out, Miriam had her head bent down from a sudden bout of dizziness, while Nana rubbed her back. Miriam felt rather embarrassed and tried to straighten.

"Are you all right?" asked the woman in an interested voice. "I'm a doctor." She sat beside the two women and reached to take Miriam's pulse. "Actually, I'm the hotel doctor."

"I'm fine," answered Miriam quickly. "Just a little tired out."

"Oh, Mama, please," begged Nana in response.

"You'd be doing me a very big favor if you came to see me in my offices," added the doctor. "I'd like to feel I'm doing a good job for the hotel."

The woman squeezed Miriam's hand and Miriam felt the woman's kindness. But still. "I don't have insurance," Miriam said.

"No need," countered the woman physician. "The hotel pays me." She fished a card out of her purse. "Come and see me at two thirty tomorrow afternoon. I'll be sure to get you out in time for work."

Miriam, who had never been seen by a real doctor in her life, agreed—for reasons having nothing to do with her own health, which she was sure was very good.

By the dinner break, Miriam had gained even more money, though she had done very little to earn any of it. True, she had sewn a couple of stitches to help fix a hem (five dollars!) and had comforted a girl in tears over her boyfriend (men cannot be expected to be so clever as we), but she'd ceased to stand handing out the towels.

Nana rushed Miriam to the employee cafeteria, where she opened her arms, gesturing broadly, and announced with a flourish, "The food is free." She seemed very happy to share such a magical experience with her cowife and settled Miriam at a long table, then brought four hot dogs from under a lamp displaying such foods—along with two big cups of fizzing soda.

As the two ate, a white woman two seats over kept eyeing Miriam in an unfriendly fashion. When Nana got up to fetch something else, the woman addressed Miriam in loud tones.

"I don't know who you are, miss, but I'd suggest you be careful. People who skim from their tips in the washroom aren't welcome around here."

Miriam let her jaw fly open in astonishment, and she stared. Was the woman implying that was why Anna had been killed? Was she so much as admitting some type of culpability? Miriam was about to respond with such a question, but before she could do that, another voice cut in: "If you're so rude to all the workers here, Georgette, no one will be left to give you your cut."

Nana came back and stood beside the young black woman who had just spoken. Miriam guessed the girl must be Zeline from Nigeria.

Zeline and Georgette—the housekeeper who took part of the tips, Miriam recalled—sniped at one another in a manner most disagreeable to hear, until Zeline finally walked away to get her food. Miriam and Nana locked eyes for a fraction of a second. Neither had enjoyed the occasion and each was embarrassed, or so Miriam concluded.

Zeline returned with a sandwich and two pastries, but by then Georgette was gone. Nana kept looking up at the clock. “That old cow,” Zeline said, referring to Georgette. “Someone should put her out of her misery, that old white witch.”

The hot dogs Miriam had eaten began to rise up from her stomach. Miriam did not like such comments wishing for someone else’s death, nor any comment that could be considered racially insulting. She was very unhappy with such talk and less than pleased with Zeline, a woman she had so looked forward to meeting one day.

Despite everything, though, Miriam felt a bit perkier after dinner, and she made some efforts to offer towels and clean the sinks. She collected nice tips. At break time, Nana rushed in with another tea for her. “It’s a good thing I am already in the right spot with all this tea and soda,” Miriam giggled.

She spent the time, otherwise, thinking about Anna’s death, and the people who had surrounded Anna at work—not very nice people, it seemed. Could either Georgette or Zeline be the guilty one? Or did the nasty tendencies of each extend no further than the spoken word? Georgette might have felt she had a sufficient motive—Anna’s skimming. But Zeline, with at least one element in her character a little off, could have held a hidden resentment against Anna too.

Nana came to get Miriam at midnight and brought her again to the locker room, where the women changed back into their street clothes. Miriam wondered if she should take home the uniform to wash and iron every night, but Nana said no, that the laundry in the basement cleaned the uniforms overnight twice a week. How amazing.

Nana transformed from a demure hotel maid into the bouncy Harlem girl from West Africa in three minutes, while Miriam struggled into her heavy wool sweater. Admittedly, she had a touch of arthritis in the winter. What an amazing day this had been, though. She’d spoken to more people today than she usually did in a whole month’s time.

The two women left through the side door to the hotel. Miriam, not a thought in her head other than if Kofi had been able to heat up his dinner, shrieked when a white, male hand reached aggressively for Nana's arm. Miriam drew back her purse so she might hit the mugger and fight him off.

The hand dropped away quickly. "Sorry, sorry," the tall, bleary-eyed man apologized, slurring his words. Miriam stood her ground, ready to fire.

"Oh, you're Anna's boyfriend, Romero," said Nana, as if in sudden realization.

"Sorry to startle you ladies." The face was mournful and Miriam supposed his being Anna's boyfriend could account for both the emotion and the smell of drink that exuded from him.

"I wondered . . . Would it be possible . . . Do you think . . . Did Anna leave anything of value in her locker?" He focused for a second and searched their faces. "Any money? Anything at all I could sell for money?"

"I don't believe . . . I wouldn't be able to . . ." answered Nana.

"Sir, I have taken Anna's uniform to wear at work," said Miriam. She quickly extracted five singles from her purse, rather sad to see them go, but recognizing the fairness of parting with the money earned with the wearing of the garment discussed. She passed the bills over to the man.

Romero licked his lips and counted carefully. "Wasn't it worth a little more?" The eyes were now neither bleary nor merely focused, but outright calculating. So this was grief at the loss of a loved one.

Miriam didn't blink even once at that. She was here to track down Anna's killer and would be at the hotel no longer than a few days whether she succeeded at her task or not.

Romero's gaze dropped. He put the five dollars in his pocket and stumbled off. No "thank you," nor farewell, nor had either Nana or Miriam given him condolences, which had seemed almost beside the point.

"Can you get into the hotel through this exit?" Miriam asked Nana.

"Not really, Mama. Unless, of course, someone was coming out and let you in."

The two looked back as they went toward the subway. Another two women workers plodded out through the door. So Romero could have gone in, found Anna alone, and drunkenly demanded money. She'd refused . . . He had knocked the woman's head against the locker. Miriam couldn't believe she had three suspects already—Georgette, Zeline, and Romero—

but did any one of them make sense for the murder?

Miriam showed up on time at Dr. Brodsky's office, which was near the hotel. The waiting room needed a paint job and was empty of patients. No one sat behind the counter. Perhaps doctoring was not as good a business as Miriam had thought.

The doctor came out wearing a different suit than yesterday—a handsome one. She smiled at Miriam. "My receptionist is out today." She shrugged. Miriam wondered if the doctor really had a receptionist, if she could afford one, or if she made the same excuse to patients every day. Miriam understood a lack of money and the covering over of each social embarrassment.

The doctor took Miriam into the examination room. Everything here was vaguely familiar to Miriam from television shows. This room at least was clean, if nothing fancy.

Dr. Brodsky put a brace around Miriam's arm and pumped it up. The air escaped. "It's good," said the doctor at last, looking surprised.

"I'm sixty-three," confided Miriam. "Not too bad for an old woman. Yes?"

"I thought you might have high blood pressure," said the doctor. "Like Anna did. I've felt so terrible about that. I had her on medication. I gave her samples. But maybe she'd stopped taking the pills." The doctor's eyes met Miriam's. "I feel guilty."

"Guilty?" Miriam didn't understand.

"Well, I suppose her pressure might have gone sky high suddenly and she collapsed. Maybe hit her head against the locker on the way down. What else could have happened?"

The doctor listened to Miriam's heart and told her to breathe.

What else could have happened? Miriam felt confused. Hadn't Anna been murdered? What a relief if she hadn't been killed, if she'd just suddenly collapsed and died on her own. Such a thing would be terribly tragic, but happily not criminal.

"So much anger over tips," suggested Miriam tentatively as she rebuttoned her blouse.

"There are problems at the hotel, of course," the doctor said. "All of us like the tourists' money. As you can see, my office isn't thronged. With two kids in school, I appreciate the hotel referrals."

How did the doctor's arrangement work in with Anna's death? Miriam couldn't imagine. "You have to give a feedback too? I mean, kickback."

Dr. Brodsky smiled and patted Miriam's arm. "We all have to do things, make deals," she said obliquely. "Take patients for free, write a prescription as a favor. Turn a blind eye. Life is like that, you understand. You must understand—you're working there. I doubt

if you're documented. You're working for tips only. You're not being paid as you should be."

Miriam felt chilled by Dr. Brodsky's recognition of her undocumented status, but she still didn't quite follow what was going on.

"It's not legal," said Dr. Brodsky patiently. "Don't misunderstand me. I don't care. But what the hotel does isn't a legal way of doing business." A minute later, she offered Miriam some vitamin samples, then said, "I don't see a thing wrong with you, thank God. You're fine." That Miriam was healthy was nothing she hadn't known all along, though she'd learned other things, things she needed to think about for a while.

Since she was early for her work and she knew Nana hadn't yet arrived, Miriam took the escalator up to the ballroom floor to use the ladies' room. She marveled at herself as she looked back at the stylish guests seated in the first floor lounge and was satisfied to see two black men, very much at ease, in suits. How far Miriam had come from her small town in Ghana. Inside the bathroom stall, she resolved to give the attendant a whole dollar tip.

But the attendant wasn't alone, and Miriam listened to the conversation that developed. The guest wasn't a guest at all, she said, but a "state labor investigator." Miriam was both interested and afraid, worried that her documentation—or lack of it—might be checked. She came out, washed her hands, took her own paper towel, and continued to listen while the Hispanic bathroom attendant kept telling the investigator she didn't understand English. When Miriam came into the outer room, the attendant cast uncertain glances at the woman from Ghana, as if the presence of a customer was only making her dilemma worse.

The situation was awkward and Miriam hurried out, not leaving the poor woman so much as a dime.

Miriam sat down on a nice chair in one of the hallways. How wonderful the furniture was. What she wouldn't do for seating like this with a beautiful blue floral fabric. So elegant. And how sturdy the legs.

So many possible answers to Anna's death. The woman could have simply dropped dead on her own, from high blood pressure, as Dr. Brodsky said—that would explain why the police weren't here today, a lieutenant like Columbo looking as if he already knew the answer to the death. Or oppositely, Dr. Brodsky, as nice as she seemed, could have been lying to protect herself—what was her motive?—or to protect someone else. Dr. Brodsky had admitted to disregarding wrongdoing so that she could afford to raise her children decently, and she now lied to continue in her place.

This was a case in which too many potential villains had turned up. Or perhaps no one was guilty of anything at all except less than admirable behavior. Miriam took the elevator down to the basement, where God in His wisdom had planted her for the time being. She went into the locker room and changed her clothes, then sat on the uncomfortable wooden bench and waited for Nana.

Miriam knocked on the manager's door. She was quite unsure of her deduction, but felt that confronting Mr. Reyos might lead to the disclosure of a further truth. She had no other course of action open to her in her investigation, and she wasn't afraid of losing a job she didn't want anyway. Moreover, if Nana got out before the state labor agency checked the workers for identification, so much the better.

Still, when Mr. Reyos told Miriam to come in, her heart skidded into overdrive. How nice that the organ was in fine working order and all that Miriam required was a bit of bravery. She walked in and closed the door behind her, but not quite all the way.

The man's head was averted, and he studied the papers on his desk with some absorption. "Sir, I have made inquiries." Miriam stopped and Mr. Reyos looked up. "I have heard that we're not being treated according to the labor laws of the state." She didn't know him well enough to understand what his muted reaction meant. His expression changed little, though he sighed.

"What is it you want?" he asked. He sounded resigned and not angry at all. Perhaps he hadn't killed Anna when she'd threatened to turn him in to the state.

Miriam tried to think of what Anna might have said in such an interaction. "What can you offer me?" she ventured. "What did you offer to give to Anna?"

"Anna?" he rose from his seat. This time he sounded agitated.

Miriam staunchly stood her ground. "Or perhaps you offered her nothing, but merely killed her. The fines for violating the labor laws of the state would be severe." So the investigator in the ladies' room had told the attendant.

Surprisingly, Mr. Reyos laughed. "Severe? An enforcement agency imposing serious penalties? That just doesn't happen."

Somehow his answer made Miriam angry. Perhaps Anna had been angry and they'd grappled?

"But other consequences could arise," Miriam said. "And now a charge of murder and jail time."

He came out from behind his desk.

"You can't kill everyone who crosses you," Miriam said evenly.

"I didn't kill Anna." He was adamant and undoubtedly irked.

"Then what happened?" asked Miriam.

Mr. Reyos shook his head. "She fell back against the locker," he said suddenly. "That's all I know. When I saw her collapse, I got out of there. I'm not guilty of anything."

Thoroughly appalled, Miriam smiled. Mr. Reyos had deserted Anna when she'd needed help. He'd let her die when he should have called an ambulance. Miriam had seen this very situation in a television episode—or maybe not an exact duplicate, but close enough. She searched for the words the television prosecutor has used. "You had a duty to render aid," she said.

"No," denied Mr. Reyos, and his eyes burned into Miriam's own. "I looked it up."

Miriam brought out her trump card. "Yes, as her employer, you had a special relationship," Miriam said. If the D.A. was as concerned and courageous as the one on TV, Mr. Reyos was headed upstate for a long stay in the Big House, whatever that meant. And if Miriam was wrong? She couldn't imagine. Because by abandoning Anna and letting her die, the man was guilty. Guilty of murder—if not actually in the eyes of the state, at the very least in Miriam's eyes.

She turned to go and call the police.

"Whatever you claim, I'll deny it," said Reyos. "And they'll kick you out of the country. Oh, and by the way . . . you're fired."

Nana entered, followed by Zeline and some of the others, all of whom had been listening through the open office door. Miriam faced Mr. Reyos. "Deny all you like," she countered. "Everyone heard. And I don't think you can fire me. Remember, Mr. Reyos. I'm an independent contractor. Or if we're employees, you owe us all back pay."

Everyone, except for Mr. Reyos, smiled.

When they found out that the district attorney wasn't going to file charges, Nana cried. Miriam felt glum as well. Though Anna's family might sue Mr. Reyos and the hotel for wrongful death, she had no family. But this was the law and how the D.A. applied it.

Mr. Reyos, they soon found out, had been fired, while the state settled with the hotel for back pay for all the documented, affected workers.

The undocumented workers vanished like snow in a heavy rain. But of course they didn't disappear, not really. They went on to try to earn their living elsewhere, and Nana returned to the safety of the Obadah home.

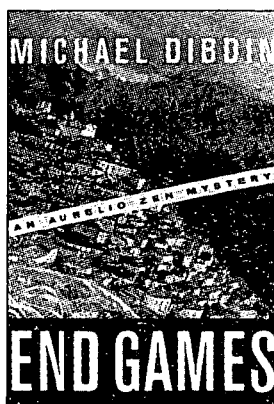
Yet birds will fly, and Miriam watched for Nana to once again extend her wings. ♣

BOOKED & PRINTED

ROBERT C. HAHN

Long-buried secrets or long-buried treasure can add spice to a mystery, and a touch of scandal never fails to add a particular flavor as well. This month's mysteries include a debut novel, a final novel, and a sophomore effort that brew up enticing combinations of murder, scandal, and treasure to which closely held secrets hold the key.

British author Michael Dibdin died in March 2007, which means that his entertaining travelogue of Italy conducted by



Italian police detective Aurelio Zen ends with *END GAMES* (Pantheon, \$23.95), the eleventh entry in the series. Dibdin was an internationalist with degrees from the University of Sussex as well as the University of Alberta. He taught English for four years while living in Perugia, Italy, and chose to live in Seattle during the last decade of his life.

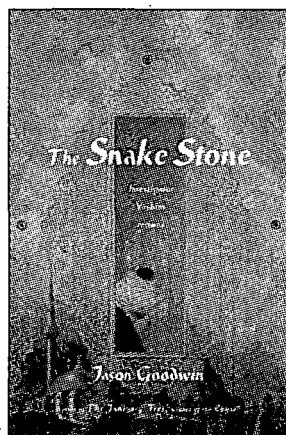
His best-loved character, Aurelio Zen, is an acute observer, and a droll one, whose talents are not always appreciated by the superiors he serves. Even when his results are good, his methods tend to ruffle the feathers of those in charge. Yet he is too valuable to be dismissed. So Zen has toured Italy and taken readers along for the journey: to Venice in *Dead Lagoon*, to Naples in *Così Fan Tutti*, to the Italian Alps in *Medusa*, to name a few. In *End Games*, Dibdin makes the Calabria region of Southern Italy, which is mountainous, isolated, and staunchly rooted in the past, come alive.

Zen is posted to the town of Cosenza as a fill-in for the current chief of police who managed to shoot himself in the foot—literally. Adding interest to the task is the murder of an American lawyer who just happened to speak Italian with the local dialect. Meanwhile, a famous Italian film director is planning a biblical film that will outdo any previously made, and an American company named Rapture Works, who's financing the project, is scouting locations in Calabria for the film and sundry other projects.

Dibdin artfully weaves ancient and modern history into his present tale. There's a rumor floating around that the invading barbarian Alaric, who sacked Rome in the fifth century, had left behind buried treasures, including certain Christian treasures, in the area around Cosenza. The local characters are immensely colorful yet authentic, while the foreigners Dibdin introduces to the scene are flamboyant, outrageous, and engaging. As always, Zen provides a lens through which the reader observes the foibles, customs, and history of one of Italy's distinctive regions.

Cambridge-educated Englishman Jason Goodwin is a historian with nonfiction works to his credit (*Lords of the Horizons: A History of the Ottoman Empire*.) His first novel, *The Janissary Tree*, copped the 2007 Edgar Award for best novel.

That novel introduced Yashim Tögalu, a eunuch and an investigator in the cosmopolitan city of Istanbul in the 1830s. Now Yashim is back in another outstanding mystery, *THE SNAKE STONE* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, \$25), which should solidify Goodwin's reputation for combining vivid historical background, intriguing plotting, and memorable characters.



The long and complex history of the city that was known as Byzantium, then Constantinople, and finally, Istanbul, has created a multicultural city where varied architectures, customs, languages, and religions form a cauldron of commerce and secrets. A visit from a French archaeologist, Maximilien Lefevre, brings mention of some treasures brought to Istanbul during its long history—including the holiest relics of Christendom, the plate and goblet used by Christ at the Last Supper. In a later visit, a very frightened Lefevre seeks Yashim's help to leave the city. That help is provided, but has unexpected consequences when Yashim finds himself the primary suspect in a murder.

Among the denizens of Istanbul Yashim counts among his acquaintances are Stanislaw Palewski, ambassador for a Polish state that no longer exists; a Greek bookseller who prices his books according to how much he thinks his customer wants it; and even the Queen Mother, a Frenchwoman and mother to the Sultan. Those memorable characters and many others high and low will play a part as Yashim struggles to clear his name.

When Yashim is forced to go underground, he discovers one of the most astounding and least-known architectural and engineering

secrets of Istanbul. Yashim's expertise in navigating Istanbul's corridors of power, as well as its meanest alleys, is thoroughly tested. Goodwin has delivered a sequel worthy of his Edgar-winning debut.

There are no hidden treasures in Laura Benedict's debut **ISABELLA MOON** (Ballantine, \$24.95), but there are plenty of secrets in this thickly atmospheric debut novel set in a still-isolated area of rural Kentucky.

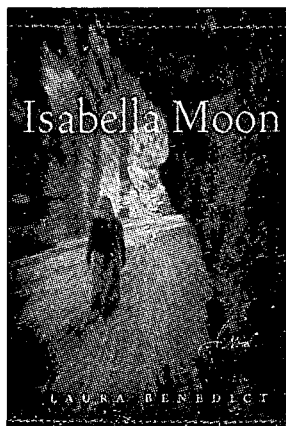
Carystown, Kentucky, sheriff Bill Delaney doesn't usually have to contend with a litany of major crimes. The worst blot on the office is the two-year-old disappearance of nine-year-old Isabella Moon.

Then Kate Russell, a newcomer to Carystown, shows up in Delaney's office with the startling news that Isabella has appeared to her and led her to where her body lies. Despite his skepticism, Bill is driven to investigate. Almost at the same time, a young high school athlete drops dead, and the department has a second death to investigate. Then when a close friend of Kate's is brutally murdered, suddenly the small-town police chief has major problems, and Kate seems his most likely suspect.

Kate Russell is a complex and captivating character. She is haunted not only by the shade of young Isabella Moon but by her own past, which emerges slowly and hauntingly as the story progresses. Kate's past is also the stumbling block that keeps her from being able to trust the goodness of the new man who's come into her life.

But Carystown's citizens have plenty of secrets to hide, and the web of deceit envelopes those who live in the Chalybeate Springs Co-op Farm (a commune on the edge of town), the powerful wheeler-dealer Janet Rourke, Kate's friend Francie Cayley and her lover Paxton Birkenshaw, and his domineering mother. As Kate's meddling and Delaney's investigations continue, more deaths occur, and the fate of Isabella Moon casts a shadow and a pall that blankets much of the town.

Too many of Benedict's characters tend to be starkly good or evil, but her strong female characters should appeal to plenty of readers. She evokes the reality of small-town Kentucky life buffeted by the currents of big-city problems nicely. Benedict's short fiction has appeared in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* and based on this debut, it is likely that more novels will follow.



CLICK, CLICK, CLICK

R. T. LAWTON

Beaumont bent over to reach inside his wide-mouthed burglar bag currently parked on a snow-covered back porch in an older neighborhood, a neighborhood that the local police department had recently designated as a high-crime area. To blend in with the silent night, Beaumont kept his voice barely audible.

"You sure this is Antoine's house?"

Directly behind him, two steps down and leaning forward to peer into the bag, Beaumont's sometime partner Yarnell swatted at the white fluff ball dangling from the end of his Santa hat. Darn thing seemed to tickle his big nose, made him want to sneeze. Plus it had to be tough to see around all that fluff, especially when the white cotton ball swung right in front of the single-eye night vision scope he wore strapped to his forehead. But in order to better answer Beaumont's question, Yarnell raised to his full height of six foot three, glanced off to his left and up over the top of a nearby six-foot wood fence. Using his right index finger, he started counting the roof of each house from the corner of the block right up to the roof above the back porch where he stood.

"This is the third house," he announced in a loud whisper, "and Antoine himself told me he lived in the third house from the left."

"From the corner?"

"That's right, from the corner."

Beaumont removed a glass cutter from the black nylon burglar bag, straightened up, and took off his gloves. To keep his hands free, he stuffed the gloves into the rear pocket of his oversized red pants.

"They ought to sew more pockets in these Santa suits," he grumbled. "There's no place to put everything you need."

In reply, Yarnell patted the wide black belt around the waist of his own fat Santa suit. "Only thing I need is this Smith and Wesson. Don't know why I ever let you talk me into doing this job the sneaky Pete way. 'Cause when I'm holding a gun on them I

don't have to worry about waking the people up, I already got their full attention. You see what I'm saying?"

Beaumont tried not to think about the guns they were carrying. Peering through his own night vision lens, he licked the large rubber suction cup on the cutter arm before attaching the rubber cup to the glass in the rear door. Finally, he turned his head to speak back over his shoulder.

"I been wondering about something. If'n Antoine is a convicted felon, then he shouldn't have no firearms in his possession anyway, right?"

"Right."

"So why are we carrying guns?"

"The world has become a dangerous place for guys like us, Beaumont. Didn't you read that *Twenty-Four Rules to a Gunfight* pamphlet I gave you last week? I'm telling you a man never knows when he'll need a loud weapon to get himself out of a tight spot."

"We're not in a tight spot."

"No, but we could be."

"All we're doing right now is standing on Antoine's back porch."

"Right now, sure, but what about later when we're standing in his house? See, that's when guns can be a man's best friend in our line of work. You do realize this state has one of those Make My Day Laws for homeowners?"

"Yarnell, you're a real comfort to have on the job."

"And that's why," continued Yarnell, "I just wish you'd'a brought something heavier than that little .25 caliber automatic you got. That's an old lady's gun." He paused for a moment. "You *did* bring it along, didn't you?"

Focusing his mind on one thing at a time, Beaumont rotated the glass cutter in a circle around the suction cup. A light scratching came from the metal blade. At the end of the circle, the blade and the sound stopped. He refocused.

"Yeah, the granny pistol's in my hip pocket underneath my gloves. I brought it along just to shut you up, but don't plan on me using it. Keep in mind I'm a professional burglar, so loud noises bother me. They usually mean you're going to prison."

"No sweat, Beaumont. We're stealing from a crook; he can't afford to call the cops."

Beaumont tugged on the suction cup and a circular piece of glass popped free of the back door window.

"I know you told me that Antoine hides his money in one of them packages under his Christmas tree, but I still have a hard time believing he'd go to all that trouble."

"You got to see it from Antoine's side," replied Yarnell. "The man

gets so much into the holiday spirit every year during the twelve days of Christmas, that he wraps up his dope in Christmas paper and puts name tags on each bundle for his buyers. Then as the buyers drop by and Antoine gets paid, he stashes all the cash in one of the other specially marked packages under the tree. Man figures it's a safe hiding place from the po-leece right up until about New Year's."

"So how's he mark the money package?"

"Don't know. Antoine was a little closedmouthed about that part."

"Then how do we know which package has the money in it?"

"We don't, that's why we take everything wrapped in Christmas paper."

Beaumont gently laid the circular piece of cut glass down on a nearby snowbank.

"I hate these hurry-up jobs, but at least that part of it makes sense. And you know I don't like to stay inside a place I'm burglarizing any longer than necessary. Let's just unwrap the gifts later at your apartment, see what we got, and split the proceeds there."

"Good enough for me," replied Yarnell. "So how much longer do I have to wait till we get inside the man's house?"

Beaumont stuck his chubby arm through the fresh hole in the window and unlocked the deadbolt.

"Door's open now."

"Then let's go."

"Wait a minute. You never told me if Antoine's got an alarm."

"Nope, no alarm."

"Okay then. Just keep in mind, as quiet as I work, I'm always careful not to disturb the victim's sleep, but you might want to drop the level of your whispering a couple of notches so as the man keeps on sleeping."

"Lighten up, Beaumont. This time of year, everybody's dreaming about a visit from Saint Nick coming down the chimney. You know, reindeer on the rooftop, click, click, click, and all that happy stuff. Got childhood visions of Santa carrying a big bag with lots of presents in it. Only difference tonight is we're on the receiving end instead of the giving end."

Yarnell moved up the last two steps onto the back porch as he talked. Snow crunched under his boots.

Beaumont winced at the sound.

"Shhhhhh."

Yarnell passed him by at the doorway and walked inside.

"Don't worry about it."

Pausing to wipe his boots on the welcome mat, Beaumont then stepped into the kitchen and tried to get his bearings. Two steps later, he bumped into the kitchen table. He stopped. Oh yeah, Yarnell had told him earlier if he had vision problems to close his right eye, which as it turned out was Beaumont's dominant one. But because Yarnell had stolen both sets of night vision equipment, and then tried them out on himself to make sure they worked, the single lens strapped on his head had been set up for Yarnell's one good eye, the left eye. Beaumont was starting to think maybe he should've practiced using this stuff before they got to Antoine's back door. He swiveled his head. Now where the hell did Yarnell disappear to?

Both hands extended in front of him like a semiblind man wandering through a dimly lit cave, Beaumont lurched forward, hoping not to run into anything else. He kept muttering to himself, "Keep right eye closed, keep right eye closed." With the right eye shut tight, objects in the interior of the house appeared to his left eye as shades of blurry green and dark grey with lots of blackness in the background.

Working his way out of the kitchen and through the dining area, Beaumont heard the sounds of munching coming from the living room.

"Yarnell," he whispered.

"I'm in here."

"What are you doing?"

"I'm eating a cookie. They're fresh-baked chocolate chip. You ought to try one."

"Well stop it. We're here to steal the man's money, not eat his snacks."

More sounds of munching, then a full-mouthed mumble.

"They're still warm. I really like 'em like that. Reminds me of the way my mom used to . . ."

"Get back on track here, Yarnell, and show me where the packages are. We got work to do."

"Gimme a minute, I got to wash down all this cookie dough. Think I saw a glass of milk here somewhere."

Beaumont tried shaking his head in disgust, but the rapid sideways movement blurred all the green objects in his one-eyed vision. Nausea set in. He stepped forward and knocked his shin on the coffee table. His left hand, whirling in tight circles to keep his balance, suddenly located the Christmas tree.

From one of the upper branches, a small glass ornament slipped off its metal hook and dropped faster than Beaumont could reach for it. The bulb bounced across the carpet and rolled under the

coffee table. Beaumont steadied himself and held his breath. The night remained silent, except for the loud swallowing of milk from somewhere behind him.

And then, a strangled, "Ugh."

"What's the matter?"

"There's soy milk in this glass. I never figured Antoine to be some kind of health nut. Do all that prison time with a man and just when you think you know him, he changes on you."

Beaumont started thinking maybe it was about time to make some well-needed partner changes in the very near future. Moving more carefully now, he pivoted to his left and prodded with the toe of his boot. The thin wall of a cardboard box yielded inward, followed by the light crinkle of wrapping paper being stressed against the counter pull of too much Scotch tape. He peered down through the one-eyed tube. A multitude of wrapped packages laid spread out on the floor under the tree. He started counting. When his count got higher than twenty, he quit.

"There's too many gifts here for us to carry in one trip."

Yarnell stepped up behind him and looked over Beaumont's shoulder.

Beaumont quickly detected a surreptitious munching going on behind his left ear. His next inhale of breath took in the aroma of clandestine chocolate wafting from the direction of Yarnell's mouth.

"Guess we'll have to make more than one trip for all this stuff," Yarnell mumbled.

Bits of what Beaumont assumed to be cookie remnants bounced off the back of his ear. He carefully brushed crumbs off the top of his shoulder.

"How do we know which ones to take?"

"Just grab the ones that look like they might have money in them."

Beaumont picked up his first package and shook it. The contents of the box slid from side to side. Undecided but thinking it could be money, Beaumont stuffed it into the Santa bag he carried in his left hand. The next box rattled. He put it back under the tree. The next three boxes went into the bag on the side of "it might be money." He tried reading the name tags to see if there was a pattern, but the combination of sloppy handwriting and green light from the night scope on blue ink name tags made most of the writing illegible.

"Come look at this," whispered Yarnell back in the vicinity of the cookie table again.

Beaumont pictured cookie crumbs and warm gooey chocolate

pieces spraying Jackson Pollock patterns on the wall as Yarnell's stage whispers and seemingly short attention span latched onto yet another freshly discovered snack, or maybe some other new found item of interest.

"What?"

"Antoine's got himself a trophy wall. And here's an award from—" Never a quick reader, and now even slower while reading through a night vision lens, Yarnell managed to drag out the pronunciation of all three large letters on the wall plaque. "—from the . . . N . . . R . . . A . . ."

Beaumont immediately stepped back to the cookie table.

"Let me see that."

Sure enough, the award had a large N, a large R, and a large A embossed on the wood and metal plaque.

"That's the National Rifle Association," exclaimed Beaumont.

"I know that's what the letters stand for," replied Yarnell. "I'm one of their lifetime members. Even got me one of them full-size posters of Charlton Heston on my bedroom wall. Of course, he's got a long beard, and he's wearing a striped bathrobe, and he has two stone tablets cradled in his arms instead of carrying an M-16, but it was the only picture of him I could find at the time."

"Omigod," said Beaumont.

"Don't think so," said Yarnell. "Heston played the part of Moses in that movie."

Beaumont grabbed the arm of his sometime partner and pulled him around so they were almost looking into each other's night vision lenses.

"Quick question here, Yarnell. If Antoine is a felon and isn't supposed to have guns, then why does he rate an award from the NRA?"

"I don't know. Go wake him up and ask him if you're so curious."

"Not on your . . ."

Beaumont suddenly clamped his hand over Yarnell's open mouth. His body stiffened like cast bronze.

"Did you hear that?"

Yarnell mumbled back through Beaumont's clenched fingers.

"Hear what?"

"That clicking noise."

"You mean like reindeer hooves on the roof?"

"No, more like . . . the hammer on a large handgun."

Yarnell was in the midst of saying he didn't hear a thing when a searing burst of light flashed through the living room.

Beaumont's ears immediately reverberated from the shock waves of a gigantic boom. His memory registered a vague video of the

huge glass star on top of the Christmas tree exploding into a thousand glittering shards. At that point, his night vision deserted him.

"What the hell was that?" screamed Beaumont.

"I think," Yarnell screamed back, "it was a .44 caliber magnum, but it could've been a .45. I'm not really sure 'cause we're in a small room and it's compressing the sound."

Beaumont forced his right eye to open. He could see again without using the night vision lens.

Someone had evidently turned on the lights in the living room.

Beaumont quickly realized he stood naked in the light, not that he didn't have any clothes on, but rather that he stood out in the open under the bright glare of an overhead baby spotlight. To his bruised left ear, as though the noise were muffled in thick wool, came the soft sound of another click.

And now, Yarnell seemed to be screaming directly into his right ear.

"I think that according to number eight of *The Rules for a Gunfight*, we should run."

"Run?" screamed back Beaumont.

"That's right," returned Yarnell. "The rest of Rule Eight says only hits count, and the only thing worse than a miss is a slow miss."

Beaumont felt Yarnell tugging at his Santa sleeve and pulling him toward the rear of the house where they'd come in earlier through the kitchen door. He wasn't sure what a slow miss was or how anybody would recognize one, but since he felt like he was already running in slow motion, Beaumont didn't particularly want to stop and debate the concept.

Approaching the dining room table, he split left and Yarnell went right. On the tabletop between them, a purple vase seemed to vaporize. Curled plastic flowers floated sideways through the air. Fake yellow petals now falling from the ceiling plastered themselves to the sweat on Beaumont's forehead. For a second, he thought he smelled something burning. A loud ringing intensified in his ears.

"This isn't working," yelled Beaumont as he rounded the far end of the table. "Give me another rule."

"Rule number five," hollered Yarnell. "It says move away from your attacker. Distance is your friend. Lateral and diagonal movements are preferred."

It registered on Beaumont's mind that he was on approach to the dining room's double-wide doorway, which opened out into the kitchen. Choosing this time to take up lateral and diagonal movements meant he would miss the open doorway and would then have to make an exit through the wall.

"Rule Five doesn't apply under these circumstances," he screamed.

"Try Rule Fourteen then, use cover or concealment as much as possible."

Preferring cover that was traveling about as fast as he was, plus moving in the same direction, Beaumont grabbed the back of Yarnell's coat and pulled himself around front into the lead. Unless the shooter fired an elephant rifle or had armor-piercing ammo in his weapon, Beaumont felt he was relatively safe running in first place as they entered the kitchen.

Two steps from the rear door and possible safety, Beaumont felt a whoosh in his right ear as if all the air had been sucked out by a passing object moving at a high rate of speed. With his inner ear no longer sending the proper signals to his brain to coordinate his sense-of-balance program, Beaumont's stride faltered and he was knocked sideways, with his back becoming wedged up against one side of the door frame. Yarnell's massive Santa bulk quickly jammed up the other half of the wooden frame. Their legs kept moving, but forward progress had ceased. They were stuck.

For once, Beaumont reflected, he should've been more serious about his resolution from the previous New Year's to lose some weight. Just a mere twenty pounds and he wouldn't be vertically high centered here in the middle of the exit. Of course it didn't help that Yarnell had eaten all those chocolate chip cookies, nor that Yarnell was pushing so hard they only got jammed in tighter.

"Quit pushing," yelled Beaumont, "so as I can squeeze my shoulders through, then we can both get outside in one piece."

However, with all the noise descending upon his now swollen eardrums, Yarnell must've only heard about every other word, something to the extent of "... push ... as ... can ... through ... we ... both ... outside," because Yarnell nodded as if he understood and then redoubled his efforts to move them through the doorway.

Time and action now seemed to slow down so much Beaumont swore when he looked back toward the living room that he actually saw the next bullet coming at him. To his dominant eye, the projectile loomed as huge as a streaking baseball headed directly for his midsection. Quickly, he sucked in his stomach to let the bullet pass. A large black button popped off the front of his Santa coat and disappeared in a fine powder mist.

Due to the small vacuum currently residing in the center of the doorway, a vacuum created by Beaumont having rapidly sucked in his stomach, Yarnell no longer had anything holding him back. Yarnell fell through the rear doorway, rolled across the porch, and

sprawled facedown into the backyard snow.

Beaumont's slow-motion action 'string suddenly snapped from too much tension, and he followed his partner's departure at a racehorse pace. Leaping from the back porch, Beaumont tramped off Yarnell's alligator-crawling body and bolted over the top of the rear fence. With a flat-footed lope, he huffed and puffed his way down the alley. Not sure which eye to keep open now, he plunged along the dark alleyway, fearful that he was being followed by some humungous black doom.

At the point of sheer exhaustion and hearing the banshee scream of police sirens approaching in his general direction, Beaumont ducked in behind a trashcan at the end of the alley. A large dark bulk squeezed in beside him. Beaumont jumped.

"Damn, Yarnell, don't scare me like that."

"I've been right behind you all the way, Beaumont."

Placing two fingers on his own carotid artery, Beaumont checked his pulse rate. When the rapid drum cadence finally slowed down to a mere gallop, he thought it might be safe to plan something for the near future, like maybe an impromptu trip to lower Mexico.

"You know," said Yarnell after a moment of his own deep gasping, "I'm not so sure we were in the right house tonight."

"I thought you said Antoine's was the third house from the corner."

"I did, but now I'm not sure which way Antoine was facing in front of his house when he gave me directions, so I might've counted from the wrong corner. In any case, the guy shooting at us had a loud wheeze to his breathing, a wheeze that Antoine don't have."

"It's a wonder you could hear anything in there."

A police car with a flashing red and blue light bar on top of the roof sped past the mouth of the alley. Brakes and tires squealed as the car slid around the corner and onto the street where Antoine lived.

"Now what?" inquired Yarnell.

Beaumont made a short dash to the exact end of the alley and peered around the corner of the fence. He felt the large bulk of his partner following close behind.

"Now, we run across the street and into that drainage ditch over there until we find a bridge we can hide out under. When everything quiets down, we'll head for home and go our separate ways like nothing ever happened here."

Half a mile later in the snow- and slush-filled drainage ditch, the two men climbed a cement slope to get up underneath the foot of

a four-lane vehicle bridge. Shivering from the cold night breeze, Beaumont huddled up against the protection of a concrete wall.

Yarnell paused just outside, gazing off to the east. An almost empty Santa bag lay at his feet.

"What are you doing, Yarnell? Get back under cover before someone sees you."

"It's Christmas Eve, I just wondered if there would be one of them bright stars in the east like Mom used to read to me about."

"Too much light pollution these days, Yarnell. All you're gonna see is high-rises and skyscrapers. Get in here."

Yarnell slowly ducked under the edge of the bridge and huddled beside Beaumont. He dragged his Santa bag in behind him.

Beaumont eyed the lump riding inside Yarnell's cloth bag.

"At least you got something out of the deal. I think I lost the bottom of my Santa bag when I leaped the fence. Open up your gift; let's find out what we got for this night's work."

Yarnell stretched one arm into the bag and extracted a solitary package. Red and silver wrapping paper glittered in the frosty air.

"I don't know, aren't we supposed to wait for Christmas morning?"

"All the trouble I've been through tonight, I want to know what we scored. Open the damn package."

Yarnell removed the red ribbon bow and slowly peeled away the outside paper. When the cardboard box was laid bare, he took off the lid and stared inside.

"What'd we get?" asked Beaumont. "Please tell me it's money."

"Nope," replied Yarnell, "but it's something I wanted ever since I was a kid. It's one of them shoot-'em-up video games with a machine to play it on. Wish I had some batteries to go with it."

Beaumont threw his Santa hat on the ground.

"Crap. Well, I hope you learned something from all this mess tonight."

Yarnell leaned back against the cement, looked out at the red blinking lights on top of tall buildings in the distance, and pursed his lips.

"Yeah, I think I did."

"And that is?"

"Rules One and Twenty-four."

"What?"

"Never attend a gunfight with a handgun, the caliber of which does not start with a '4'. Also, it's preferable to bring two guns along. In fact, bring all your friends who have guns. Not that we can count that little popgun in your pocket." Yarnell glanced at his partner. "See what I mean about having some heavy artillery on your person at times like these?"

Beaumont figured Yarnell was working himself into a dissertation on whether it was John Wayne or Charlton Heston that had invented the rules for a gunfight, but at this point Beaumont really didn't care who got the credit. He slid out from under the far side of the bridge and trudged off into the snow. The single lens night vision equipment stood cocked up on his forehead like the peak of a crooked crown on a nomad prince. The phrase "a wise man knows his limitations" kept repeating itself through his mind.

Right now, he had to get away from Yarnell, far away from this neighborhood, and far, far away from everything that'd happened. If he wasn't careful, he'd end up suffering from post traumatic stress syndrome or whatever it was that put a tic in your right eye so as people would suddenly find excuses to cross the street in busy traffic rather than look you in the face.

Now that Beaumont thought about it, even the noise every vehicle had made as it crossed over the bridge above his head had bothered him. That irregular click, click, click of street metal hitting down against adjoining bridge metal from the passing of each set of tires seemed to put a twitch into the very core of his nervous system.

Oh sure, he told himself, the clicking noises overhead weren't reindeer hooves on the roof, but still, the sound did remind him of something else. A clicking sound he would just as soon forget if he was to continue in his chosen profession. ♫

HOW TO SOLVE AN ACROSTIC

Using the definitions, fill in as many words as you can in the column on the right. Then transfer the letters from the column to their corresponding places in the diagram. A black square in the diagram indicates the end of a word. When completed, the diagram will yield a mystery-themed quotation. The initial letters of the words in the righthand column spell out the name of the author and the work from which the quote was taken.

HOW'S MY DRIVING?

LOREN D. ESTLEMAN

The truck stop was lit up like a Hollywood movie premiere, an oval of incandescence in an undeveloped landscape where a county road ducked under the interstate. I parked my rig in the football field-sized lot and went into the diner, a little unsteady on my pins. I'd been stuck for an hour in a snarl caused by someone's broken axle and a thousand cars slowing down to gape at it, and I'd hit the flask a few times to flatten my nerves. If I missed my contact tonight it would be another week before he came back the other direction.

Brooks and Dunn were whining on the retro-look juke as I took a stool at the end of the counter. Most of the other customers were seated in booths. I counted eleven, shoveling out their plates and blowing steam off their thick mugs. It was late and there was a lull between early escapees from the traffic jam and the next batch backed up at the scales. The waitress, a tired-looking blonde of forty or so, came over with a clean mug and a carafe. In those places they put coffee in front of you the way they do a glass of water in others.

I nodded at the question on her face and watched her pour. "I bet you hate these slow times," I said.

She was silent for a moment, looking at me, and I knew I was being sized up for a pickup artist or just friendly. "I don't know which is worse," she said then, "this or the rush. When it's on I need six hands to keep up, and when it isn't I don't know what to do with the two I've got."

"My old man said he'd rather work than wait." I sipped. She made a pretty good pot. There's a trick to brewing strong coffee without making it bitter.

"He a trucker too?"

"He was a hood. They've got him doing ninety-nine years and a day in Joliet for murder."

"Well, there's a conversation starter I don't hear every night."

But I could tell she didn't believe me.

I didn't try to set her straight. The whiskey had loosened me up too much. I needed to put something on top of it. "You serve breakfast all the time?"

She said sure, it's a truck stop, and I ordered scrambled eggs and a ham steak. She gave it to the cook through the pass-through to the kitchen without writing it down and left the counter to freshen the other customers' coffee. When she got back she served me and refilled my cup. She watched me eat.

"You seem pretty well adjusted for the son of a convict."

"I was grown when he went in," I said, chewing. "It wasn't his first time, though. He did two bits for manslaughter on plea deals. Cops figured him for at least fifteen, but they only got him good on the last one."

She hoisted her eyebrows. "He was a serial killer?"

"Hell, no. Serial killers are loonies who slept with their mothers. He was a pro."

"A hit man? Like for the mob?"

"Most of the time. Sometimes he freelanced, but you can get jammed up working for civilians. I wouldn't touch one of those." I realized what I'd said and changed the subject in a hurry. "Got any more hash browns?"

She put in the order. A trucker came in, one of the sloppy ones with a belly and tobacco stains in the corners of his mouth, and sat down at the other end of the counter. She ordered him a burger and a Coke and came back with the hash browns. "You've got a real line of crap, but it's one I never heard. So how'd the cops trip him up?"

"Circumstantial evidence. He ran a bar in Jersey, and guys kept going in and never coming out. His lawyer objected, but the judge was a hard case and allowed it in. There was some other stuff, but the past history's what clinched it for the jury." I poured ketchup on the potatoes. "That was his mistake, always operating in the same place. The best way to avoid drawing suspicion is to move around a lot. One hit in Buffalo, the next in Kansas City, another in Seattle. Get yourself a front that involves plenty of travel."

"Like truck driving."

I took a long draft of coffee. I was going to have to change my brand of booze. The one I drank talked and talked. "Sure. Or sales. The bigger the territory, the less chance of the cops getting together and comparing notes. Anyway, that's how I'd do it."

"Trucking's better," she said. "No one looks twice. You all run to the same type."

I turned my head to look at Big Belly waiting for his hamburger. Then I grinned at her.

"Okay, two types. One looks like a pro wrestler gone to seed, the other like Randy Travis. The point is, there's a lot of both. Traveling salesmen are about extinct. You notice the ones that are left." She folded her arms and leaned them on the counter. There were circles under her eyes, and she was older than I liked them in general, but she had good cheekbones and a serious expression. I'd had my fill of the playful kind. "How do you work it? Do they call you, or do you check in?"

Just then the cook set the burger and a plate of slimy fries on the sill. She delivered them without comment and took up the same position at my end, arms folded on the counter.

I pushed away my plates, unrolled the pack from my sleeve, and held it up. A NO SMOKING sign hung in plain sight on the wall behind her, but she shrugged. I got out two, gave her one, and lit them both. "If I went in for that work," I said, blowing smoke, "I'd have them call that eight-hundred number on the back of my truck. You know the one."

She nodded. "'How's My Driving?' with the number to call and complain. I can't remember the last time I saw a truck that didn't have it."

"That's what's beautiful about it. I'd have it forwarded to my cell. If I cut someone off in traffic and he called, I'd tell him. I'd look into it, blow him off, like I'm a dispatcher. The other kind, the paying kind; if the cops trace it I can always say it was a wrong number. If there were no complications I'd adjust my route and take care of business."

"Pretty smart."

"Smarter than my old man, anyway. Smart enough not to go in for that line of work."

She straightened up and put out her cigarette in what was left of my eggs. "I thought so. Just another pickup. The trouble with you guys is you've seen *Bonnie and Clyde* one too many times. You think every girl who slings hash is just waiting for her chance to hook up with some road-show Jesse James."

"*Badlands*, actually. But you've got me pegged."

She figured my bill, slapped it on the counter, and left to bus tables. I finished my cigarette and paid, leaving fifteen percent. I wanted to leave more, but I'd done too much already to make her remember me. I went back out to my rig.

It's a nice one, a secondhand Freightliner with an orange tractor and a shiny silver trailer; when new it had set someone back the price of a house on the beach. In the sleeping quarters behind the

seat I switched on the light, went over my notes one more time, and looked at the driver's license photo blowup and telephoto candid once again for luck, then fed them to the cross-shredder I'd added to the standard equipment. I looked at my watch. I had better than an hour to kill. His company had him on a tight schedule, and he couldn't afford to lose another job. The Feds had told him he had no more coming if he expected any more help from them.

Twenty to midnight. I took two more hits from the flask and went back into the diner.

Big Belly had finished his meal and left. I waited while she rang up a middle-aged tourist couple with fanny packs, then asked if she got off at midnight.

"Why? You going to buy me a cuppa and tell me you're an international spy?"

"I started off on the wrong foot. I'll make it cappuccino if it'll make up for being a jerk."

She thought that over. She frowned more attractively than most women smiled. I had an almost overpowering urge to see what her smile looked like. She was as hard to put away as the flask, which I had now in my hip pocket.

"I'm on till four," she said. "But I'm past due for a break. Coffee's fine, but I wouldn't mind a slice of pie."

She asked the cook to cover the counter and brought the coffees and a wedge of lemon meringue to a booth in the smoking section, away from the others. I produced the flask and when she nodded I trickled some from it into both cups. We tapped them together in an unspoken toast.

She made a face when she tasted it. "I suppose it's good whiskey, but you don't drink it in coffee for the taste, do you?"

"My old man only drank it this way when he had a cold."

"You're not going to talk about him again, are you?"

"That subject's closed."

We shared small talk, or what passed for it between strangers late at night. Her name was Elizabeth; she preferred Beth, but she had LIZ scripted on her uniform blouse and said I could call her that as long as she was dressed for this job. She was working two jobs to earn enough to pay a lawyer to get custody of her ten-year-old daughter. She was a recovering meth addict. Her lawyer said if she could stay clean another six months she had a better chance in court. "So much for budding romance," she said, forking pie into her mouth.

"If I go on hitting this stuff the way I've been lately, we'll both be in the same boat." I added more to my cup. She frowned again

when I offered to freshen hers, then nodded. The coffee was still hot; the fumes entered my nose and speeded up the process. I had to close one eye to see only one of her.

"Conscience," she said. "I guess you have to anesthetize yourself to make a clean job of it."

I couldn't tell if she was needling me or if she was really interested. I asked her what her other job was.

"Not as glamorous as this. Tell me about some of the people you've killed."

I looked at her, closing one eye. Her mouth twitched at the corners. It was going to be one of those conversations. In the same vein I told her about Omaha and then Sioux Falls, that bitched-up job that had almost got me pinched. I'd spent a nervous day maneuvering myself back into position to make it good. I was careful to speak hypothetically, spinning a story to keep the lady's interest.

I put away the flask, but by then I wasn't paying as much attention as I should have. I told her what I was working on, an open contract; a hundred and fifty grand to the man who made an example of a mouthy errand boy who'd blabbed enough in court to take down a chunk of the East Coast and put himself in the Witness Protection Program. But Anderson was a grifter who couldn't resist the temptation to turn a dishonest dollar, even if it brought attention and he had to be relocated under yet another identity. At present he was delivering office furniture from Cincinnati to L.A. and back, with a new face courtesy of the taxpayers to keep him from being recognized in case of a chance encounter with a former acquaintance. I'd started out careful, but somewhere along the way I stopped being hypothetical and mentioned the fact that Anderson always put in at that truck stop and was due there in a little while.

"Do you use a gun?"

"I have, but it makes a lot of noise. A knife's better for close work, and you know right away if you made it good. Also it's cheaper to replace when you leave it at the scene, with the prints wiped off, and you don't get jammed up if the cops find one on you. A lot of truckers carry buck knives for quick repairs."

I heard myself then, and it sobered me in a hurry. Then she chuckled, shaking her head, and the smile turned out to have been worth waiting for.

"You sure do sling the bull." She finished her pie and slid away the plate. "I ought to dump my coffee in your lap. So why am I not doing that?"

I took out my pack and lit us both, relieved. "Maybe I'm the first guy you ever met in this place didn't think pushing a rig was

the most romantic job in America. It's boring as hell is what it is. You make up stories just to keep from aiming straight at a bridge abutment."

"It's pretty clever, especially that bit about being able to move around being a big advantage. You ought to write for the movies."

"You need to know somebody," I said. "And it helps to know how to spell."

She laughed. I grinned. It was going to be all right. Then the cook made a racket behind the counter, and that meant her break was over. She thanked me for the pie and the entertainment, and I got up like a gentleman when she rose. She pressed against me briefly—probably an accident, but try telling that to my physical reaction. She switched her hips in the tight uniform walking away. I was going to have to stop in on my way back across country.

Back behind the wheel I stuck the flask in the glove compartment and fired up the diesel. The Anderson job was out, at least at that location. If I was to get a jump on all the others looking for a big payday I'd have to follow him when he left, run him off some lonely section of road, and do the job with a jack handle, or anything but a knife. It would help that he wasn't going by the name Anderson and that the Feds would make sure it didn't get out that a witness in their care came to a bad end. If Liz read about it, she'd think it was an accident and wouldn't connect it to me.

One thing was sure. I needed to save the whiskey from then on for after the job, as a treat instead of a stimulus to action.

Anderson pulled up half an hour late, his company rig plastered with mud from some detour down a dirt road, probably in search of a crap game. The man had no pride, in his workmanship or anything else. The cargo of Arrow shirts I was carrying may have been just a cover, but I'd deliver them on time. Apart from ridding the world of a rotten snitch, I'd be doing some dispatcher the favor of not having to can him.

He went into the diner, looking as sloppy as the way he approached his duties. I remembered what Liz had said about there being two types of trucker, the big-bellied kind and the kind that looked like Randy Travis. I adjusted the rearview for a look at the stalwart chin, the granite squint, the hair cut short at the temples and left long in front to tumble go-to-hell fashion over the forehead. She'd felt firm and warm pressing against me. I wanted another pull at the flask, but I tamped down the temptation with a smoke.

I dozed off, I think. I jumped, alert all at once and cursing, but Anderson's filthy tractor-trailer stood where he'd left it, and the clock on the dash told me only five minutes had passed. At least

I'd had the presence of mind to ditch the butt in the ashtray, where it had smoked itself out. I didn't remember doing it. Blackouts are a good sign to cut back.

I turned on a late-night talk show for company: the war, the economy, yet another scandal on Capitol Hill. If I'd ever had reason to regret the path my life had taken, self-esteem was only a dial switch away. I put in Johnny Cash and tried to keep up with him on the Rock Island Line.

Forty minutes passed, an hour. I pictured Anderson lingering over a plate of slop, maybe chatting up Liz. I hoped to hell he wasn't trying to impress her with his career in crime.

I got restless after ninety minutes. His desks and crap were due in Milwaukee by noon. I didn't picture him highballing it to make his deadline. He was exceeding even the margin of ineptitude I'd drawn up for him. I ditched the cigarette I'd started and stepped down to investigate. He didn't know me from Donald Duck. I could sit slurping coffee on the stool next to his and he'd think I was just another gear-cruncher, feeling all superior because he was just slumming from the wise-guy life.

The place was jumping. Just in the time I'd been out of the loop the lot had filled with Macks and Peterbils and the odd Winnebago, and Liz was too busy filling cups and plunking down bowls of chili to notice me. There were more beer guts than Traveses crowding the counter, but Anderson wasn't among them, nor at any of the booths, where the knights of the road sat belching onions and air-shifting down steep mountain grades for their bored audiences. I went down the narrow tiled corridor that led to the showers and toilets.

Anderson wasn't in any of them, not even the ladies' room, where a schnook like him might wander into without stopping to read the sign on the door. The only door left was marked EMPLOYEES ONLY.

He lay there on the floor among the mops and cartons of toilet paper and industrial-sized mustard dispensers, on his face in the middle of a stain that didn't look like anything but what it was. I bent to feel his neck for a pulse, but didn't get that far. The knife stuck out hilt-deep from just below his left shoulder blade, flat, with a brass heel and a printed woodgrain on the steel handle. I groped for the buck knife in my left pants pocket, purely from reflex. It wasn't there.

The door flew open and the rest was shouting and shoving and my feet kicked out from under me and two hundred pounds of county law kneeling on my back and the muzzle of a big sidearm tickling the back of my neck. I heard my rights and felt my shoul-

ders pulled almost out of their sockets and the cold, hard, heavy clamp of the cuffs on my wrists.

I kept my mouth shut, credit me that. I was as sober as a Shaker and met every pair of eyes that locked with mine during the hustle through the crowded diner and out the door toward the radio car, where some kind soul who cared whether I suffered a concussion pressed down my head with an iron palm, shoved me into the backseat, and slammed the door.

The lot was desert bright, sheriff's spotlights adding candlepower to the pole lamps, the night air throbbing with sirens grinding down and radios muttering and spectators' chatter and the monotonous drone of official voices ordering the crowd to disperse, go home to your families, nothing to see here. I sat staring at the gridded polyurethane sheet that separated me from the front seat, where a fullback in uniform sat on one haunch with a foot on the pavement, murmuring into a mike, lights twinkling on the Christmas-tree console that divided the bucket seats in front.

When I got tired of looking at that I stared at the carpeted floor at my feet. I hadn't a chance with a not-guilty plea. The cops would track me through the ICC log and place me at the scene of every hit I'd performed. A good prosecutor would find a way to bring that out in court, even if my knife in Anderson's back wasn't enough. ("Someone picked your pocket? *That's* your defense?") You can't argue with the record. I was pinned as tightly as my old man in his bar where customers kept going in and never came out.

I raised my eyes to meet those of the curious pressing in for a closer look before they were manhandled out of the way by the hard men who had taken over the truck stop. One of the pairs of eyes belonged to Liz, looking less tired now, with that smile on her face as she made a gun with her finger and shot me with it.

I didn't know what it meant at first. Our conversation had taken place on the other side of the flask and came drifting back in pieces. One piece slowed down long enough for me to reel in.

Her other job wasn't as glamorous as this.

And as she faded back into the crowd, I heard the rest, as clearly as if she were still speaking: "You don't have to move around. I see just as many opportunities as you do just staying in one place." ♣

DYING WORDS

ACROSTIC BY ARLENE FISHER



For instructions on how to solve the acrostic puzzle, turn to page 69.
The solution to the puzzle will appear in the March issue.

DEFINITIONS

WORDS

A. Protective covering	<u>70</u>	<u>112</u>	<u>142</u>	<u>93</u>	<u>8</u>	<u>60</u>	<u>148</u>	<u>213</u>
B. Rat's activity	<u>175</u>	<u>128</u>	<u>203</u>	<u>92</u>	<u>124</u>	<u>73</u>	<u>135</u>	<u>20</u>
C. Mors equal	<u>154</u>	<u>31</u>	<u>180</u>	<u>172</u>	<u>126</u>	<u>35</u>	<u>45</u>	<u>79</u>
D. Deafening silence, e.g.	<u>138</u>	<u>174</u>	<u>101</u>	<u>18</u>	<u>43</u>	<u>87</u>	<u>123</u>	<u>160</u>
E. Quite ineffective	<u>52</u>	<u>84</u>	<u>71</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>104</u>	<u>169</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>194</u>
F. Obscures	<u>88</u>	<u>117</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>63</u>	<u>127</u>	<u>102</u>	<u>25</u>	<u>212</u>
G. Site of Rome: 2 wds.	<u>199</u>	<u>49</u>	<u>162</u>	<u>77</u>	<u>204</u>	<u>54</u>	<u>98</u>	
H. Botswana neighbor	<u>111</u>	<u>15</u>	<u>176</u>	<u>59</u>	<u>153</u>	<u>209</u>	<u>27</u>	<u>190</u>
I. 1937	<u>85</u>	<u>188</u>	<u>58</u>	<u>120</u>	<u>90</u>	<u>200</u>	<u>36</u>	<u>66</u> <u>80</u>
J. Father of Manasses	<u>116</u>	<u>22</u>	<u>53</u>	<u>62</u>	<u>166</u>	<u>150</u>	<u>202</u>	
K. Gift garnitures	<u>183</u>	<u>134</u>	<u>55</u>	<u>76</u>	<u>16</u>	<u>144</u>	<u>29</u>	
L. Turkish saber	<u>106</u>	<u>156</u>	<u>69</u>	<u>131</u>	<u>168</u>	<u>81</u>	<u>186</u>	<u>34</u>
M. Roman Catholic honorific	<u>206</u>	<u>107</u>	<u>211</u>	<u>44</u>	<u>171</u>	<u>196</u>	<u>185</u>	<u>173</u>
N. Word with "span"	<u>75</u>	<u>41</u>	<u>64</u>	<u>182</u>	<u>24</u>	<u>193</u>	<u>91</u>	<u>143</u> <u>164</u>
O. Aroused (old feelings)	<u>105</u>	<u>32</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>118</u>	<u>192</u>	<u>38</u>	<u>158</u>	<u>214</u> <u>89</u>
P. Slight gradation	<u>99</u>	<u>72</u>	<u>159</u>	<u>140</u>	<u>198</u>	<u>68</u>	<u>109</u>	

1	T	2	E	3	W	4	Y		5	O	6	E	7	F	8	A	9	Q	10	X		11	X	12	Z	13	S		
14	U	15	H	16	K	17	T		18	D	19	V	20	B	21	S	22	J	23	Y	24	N	25	F	26	W			
27	H	28	U	29	K			30	S	31	C	32	O		33	T	34	L	35	C	36	I	37	X	38	O	39	Y	
40	U	41	N	42	R	43	D	44	M			45	C	46	R		47	W	48	U	49	G			50	U	51	V	
52	E	53	J	54	G	55	K	56	Q	57	S	58	I		59	H	60	A	61	Q	62	J			63	F	64	N	
		65	T	66	I			67	Z	68	P	69	L	70	A		71	E	72	P	73	B	74	Y			75	N	
76	K	77	G	78	W	79	C			80	I	81	L	82	S	83	T		84	E	85	I	86	X	87	D	88	F	
89	O			90	I	91	N	92	B	93	A	94	W	95	U	96	X	97	Z	98	G	99	P			100	Z	101	D
102	F	103	T	104	E	105	O	106	L			107	M	108	U	109	P	110	V	111	H	112	A	113	Y	114	Z		
115	X	116	J	117	F	118	O	119	U	120	I	121	R			122	Y	123	D			124	B	125	W	126	C	127	F
		128	B	129	V	130	Q			131	L	132	T	133	V	134	K	135	B	136	U	137	S			138	D	139	Z
140	P	141	S			142	A	143	N	144	K	145	Y	146	X	147	U		148	A	149	Q	150	J	151	R			
152	Q	153	H	154	C	155	R	156	L	157	X			158	O	159	P	160	D	161	Z			162	G	163	R	164	N
165	Q	166	J	167	T	168	L			169	E	170	V	171	M			172	C	173	M	174	D	175	B			176	H
177	W	178	R	179	Q			180	C	181	V	182	N	183	K	184	Y	185	M	186	L			187	V	188	I	189	Q
190	H	191	Y	192	O	193	N			194	E	195	S	196	M	197	V	198	P	199	G	200	I	201	R	202	J		
203	B	204	G			205	W	206	M			207	Z	208	T	209	H	210	W	211	M	212	F	213	A	214	O	215	X

Q. Contemporary of S. J.

Perelman: 2 wds.

61 189 130 9 152 165 56 179 149

R. Doomed

46 42 151 163 178 155 201 121

S. Marked by abrupt sounds

141 30 21 57 13 82 137 195

T. Like some slips

208 17 1 33 103 83 65 167 132

U. Simple tablet

136 40 147 108 14 95 48 50 28 119

V. Item made from a jipijapa plant: 2 wds.

187 19 129 110 181 51 170 133 197

W. Found

125 26 47 3 205 210 177 78 94

X. Showed boredom, maybe: 2 wds.

157 37 10 115 146 215 96 11 86

Y. Placing

74 23 4 39 191 122 184 113 145

Z. CDC concern

114 207 12 139 161 100 67 97

DEATH TAKES CENTER STAGE

STEVE LINDLEY

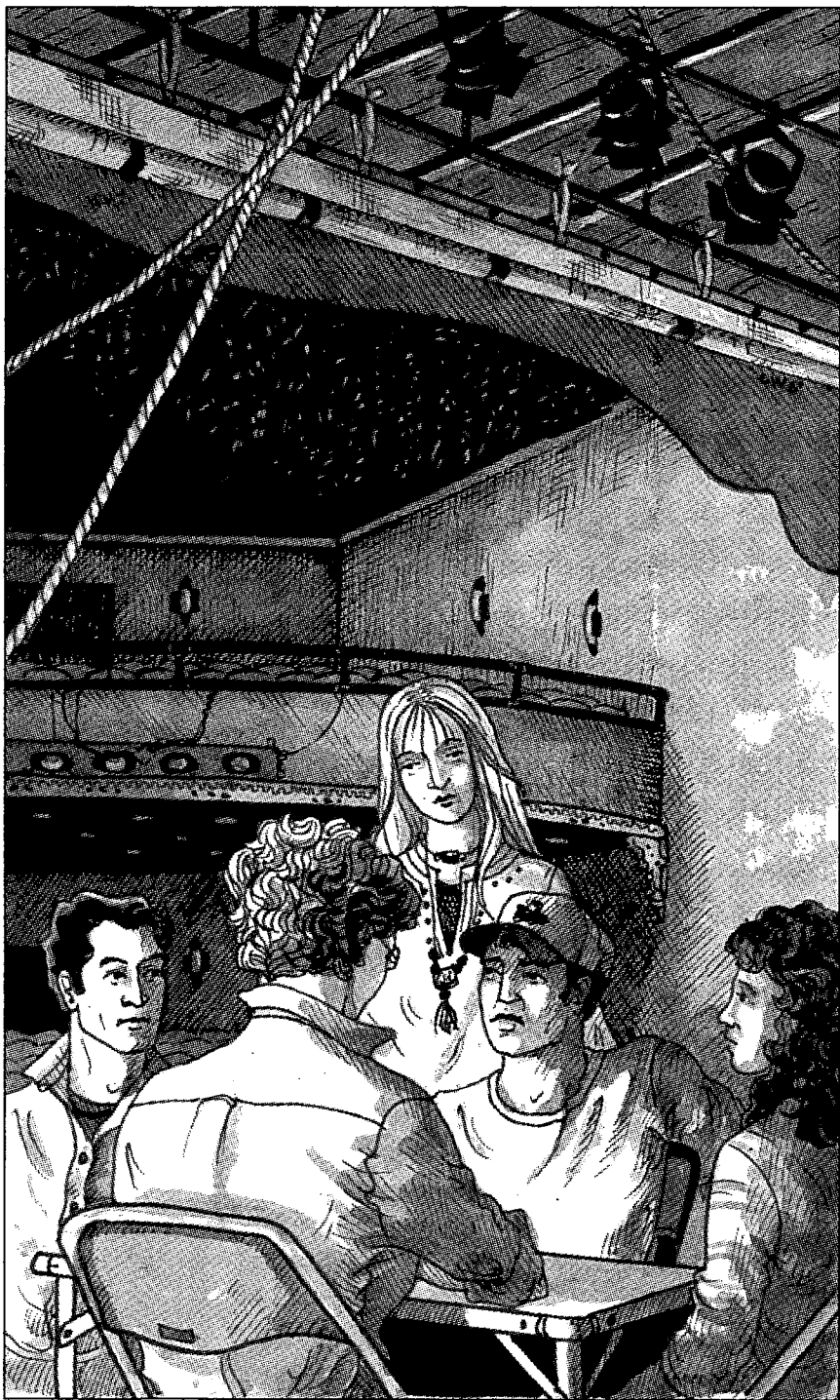
The wind seldom woke Kubiak, though there were nights when it came off the lake so fierce it not only rattled the windows but pressed through the cracks in their old frames, producing wails too sonorous to be ignored. On those nights, once woke, he could find calm only on his feet, in the dark, staring out at Lake Michigan through one of those windows, watching the storm until the worst of it died down.

Tonight he stood in the front room at the picture window, as Denise had yet to wake and he didn't want to disturb her, though considering the intensity of the wind he didn't know how he might manage that short of jumping up and down on the bed shouting Native American war whoops. Besides, the large window was best for observation, and he watched the sheets of rain hit the double pane of glass inches from his nose, then roll down in waves, causing undulations in the pinpoints of light that were the street-lamps along Lake Shore Drive seven stories below.

There was little traffic on the Drive. At one point, a taxi came off of Belmont and stopped directly below, at his apartment building's entrance. The car's rear door opened and a woman got out, stood, holding the door, in the rain, the tails of her coat flapping. She wasn't wearing a hat. Seconds later, a man climbed out behind her, slammed the cab's door shut, and the two ran, shoulders hunched, into the building.

Well, though he couldn't imagine going out on a night like this, Kubiak supposed it was better to be at the point of arrival than that of departure. The taxi pulled away. Another sheet of water came up hard against the window, slid down in ripples. Then the ringing of the phone behind him broke the room's silence, sounding so unnaturally loud it made him jump. He didn't move at first, stood staring at its outline in the dark, wondering what at this time of night—

It rang again, and he thought of Denise, moved across the



room, and picked up the receiver before it could ring a third time. Purcell was on the other end, the doorman downstairs working graveyard shift. There was a hint of apology in his voice.

"Mr. Watts and Miss Leigh. They say they're here to see you."

Kubiak, still in the dark, literally, with the shadows of the storm playing on the walls all around him, told Purcell he didn't recognize the names and to ask them what they wanted.

A pause, then, "Miss Leigh says she knows your wife." Another pause. "She says she does Mrs. Kubiak's hair."

The phone had woken Denise. She had emerged from the bedroom and was making her way prudently down the hall.

"Who does your hair?" Kubiak called out to her.

"What?" She found a light switch, clicked on the lamps, blinked. "What?"

Kubiak blinked against the light as well, squinted at his wife and her hair. "Better send them up," he said into the phone. "Tell them it's an emergency."

"What is it?" Denise asked. "Who is it?"

"Only friends of yours this time, thank goodness. How much trouble can they be?"

The two sat pressed tight together on the couch, the young man's arm wrapped around the girl's shoulders; her blond hair, damp from the rain, falling in strands over his arm. His hair was dark and shaved skin-close on the sides. They were wearing the same weight of jewelry, except that all of his was pierced into his ears, while hers adorned her nose, lower lip, left eyebrow, and Kubiak could only guess what else.

The clock above the small bar by the window read two thirty as Denise, in her housecoat, handed them the rum and Cokes they had requested on her offer of drinks. Kubiak might have asked for IDs. Instead, he picked up where the conversation had left off.

"You're certain she's dead?"

Miss Leigh nodded. "Yes." She appeared to need the drink more than her boyfriend did, and she took a good swallow before adding, "I've never seen a dead person before, but I don't see how she could have been anything else."

"You never touched her?"

"No, I never got that close. I just sort of . . . gaped, then turned and ran back through the theater lobby and out the door."

"She's dead, all right," Watts said. "And from the looks of things, there was nothing Barbara could have done for her, if that's the point you're getting at." The young man hadn't said much so far,

but then so far Kubiak mostly had been quietly listening. Kubiak addressed him.

"Is that why Barbara went and got you? For a professional opinion?"

"She didn't come and get me. She ran to the El station and called me while she was waiting for the train. I'm the one that told her not to go anywhere until I . . . But she's already explained all that."

She had, indeed, but with the sequence of events so jumbled and the details so sketchy Kubiak would have demanded she run through it three times again had it not been two thirty in the morning.

From what Kubiak made of it, Barbara Leigh had been a member of a local theater company up until three months ago, when she and the operations manager of the theater they used, a Ms. Janet Rydell, had a falling out. According to Barbara, the agreement to part company had been mutual. Recently, however, Barbara had expressed a desire to return to the theater company. The members of the group had no objections, again that according to Barbara. The only sticking point had been Ms. Rydell. Barbara had been attempting over the past few weeks to meet with Ms. Rydell so they could put their animosities behind them, but so far Ms. Rydell had flatly refused the offer.

Tonight, during a late night meeting over drinks with the three core members of the company, Barbara learned that Ms. Rydell was working late, alone at the theater, preparing for tomorrow's full dress rehearsal of the company's latest play. Barbara left the group, determined finally to confront Ms. Rydell, only to find that someone had beaten her to that. Upon entering the empty theater she discovered Rydell's bloody corpse lying stage center.

"You say you entered through the lobby door?" Kubiak asked.

"Yes."

"It was locked?"

"Yes."

"Then, you have a key."

"Well, of course. How else would . . . Oh, I see." She glanced at her boyfriend. She had been doing that. He squeezed her shoulders tighter and she continued. "I suppose I should have given it back to Pamela weeks ago. I just never got around to it."

"Pamela?"

"Pamela Lipinski. She's the acting treasurer, and a lead player. She gave me one when I joined my first production. There's a door around back with a doorbell, but the alley is awfully dark, and we work all hours. There was an incident a couple of years back—"

"So there are a few keys out there."

"Yes. Four or five that I know of. Mine; Pamela's, of course; and the other three principal members of the company, Mike Morris, Paul Volti, and Jeri Hall."

"Along with Janet Rydell."

"Yes. Of course."

"I don't suppose you thought to lock the door when you left."

"Yes. Well, no. I mean, it's locked now, but that wasn't how I left it then."

Another glance at the clock. He envisioned the conversation

"**O**ld Rydell always wanted to do a one- continuing in circles over breakfast.
woman show. I don't suppose at this "Miss Leigh, could
point she'd mind doing it facedown." you just run that
last part—"

"When Simon and I left to come here, we made sure to lock the door. But the first time, when I was alone, when I found her . . . Well, I just ran. Ran and ran."

Actually, she had run only as far as the Belmont El stop. She claimed she had been headed back to the bar and her theater friends, but decided instead to go uptown to her boyfriend, Watts, because he would "know what to do." While she was waiting for the train, she called him on her cell phone to make certain he was home. He asked if she was sure of what she saw, told her to wait where she was, then hopped the Howard Line, and met her at the El stop. She led him to the theater so he could be sure of what she saw. After some discussion, the name of one of her day job clients came up, a very nice lady who happened to be married to an ex-cop. They found a twenty-four-hour restaurant that had a phone book, looked up "Kubiak," hailed a cab, talked to Purcell, rode the elevator to seven, and ordered rum and Cokes.

"Was there ever a point," Kubiak asked, "at which either of you considered phoning the police?"

"But," Barbara said, "you are the police. Or at least you used to be."

"Used to be. And the fact you came to me instead of dialing 911 is not going to sit well with those who still are."

Watts spoke again. "We already know how this is going to sit with the cops. It's the reason we came to you."

The young man wasn't bothering to hide his animosity. Kubiak wondered if he naturally was that blunt or if he was simply performing his duty as shield for Barbara. But before Watts could say anything else, Barbara rested her hand on his, and he paused, exhaled, then removed his arm from her shoulders and leaned forward.

"Look," he said more softly. "According to Barbara, you were the guy who set the cops straight on the murder of that Lincoln Park

doctor last winter. We're not necessarily asking you do the same here, but whoever killed this Rydell is setting up Barbara to take the fall for it. All we want you to do is come with us, see what we saw, and give us some idea of where she stands."

"I've already told you I have no intention of doing that."

Watts's calm demeanor as negotiator melted away, and the fire came back in his eyes. Again, before he could speak, Barbara placed her hand over his. Kubiak's words had had an effect on her as well. When he had said them ten minutes ago, they had caused a look of desperation and a threat of tears. This time she showed only a childlike loss of hope. Kubiak was suddenly struck with the thought that if she had been sitting on that couch alone, as shivering wet and frightened as she was, with no one's arm holding her shoulders, he just might have been tempted to go back with her to the theater. Just might . . .

Again he addressed Watts, perhaps for that reason. "You've said twice now that someone set Barbara up for the murder. What makes you think so?"

"Because she didn't do it."

"That's not an answer to my question. You haven't even given me an indication yet of why you're certain Rydell was murdered in the first place. You say she was lying still and there was blood. People fall. They cut their heads, necks. Neither of you even thought to check for a pulse."

"Come with us, you'll see."

"That's still not an answer."

"Well, it's what we came here to say. Barbara and I have talked this out, and we stand firm. You have to see the point we're at. Right now Barbara is ready to cut and run out of this state, out of the country, and never look back. I'm willing to go with her, sure, but even if the cops never did catch up to us, what kind of life would we have? So I'm saying we stay and fight, find out who did this. Only, it's not my neck in the noose. You can give us an idea of our chances if we do stay, but we need to know for sure. We could describe to you everything we saw and miss the half of it, or you could ask a hundred questions and still . . . Well, anyway, what we do is up to us, what you do is up to you. You can call the cops right now yourself, if you want to. Or you can come with us, or wash your hands of the whole thing. Which is it?"

Watts took one more swallow of his drink, pushed away his glass to signal he was through talking. Kubiak looked at Barbara, who appeared apprehensive but resigned to any decision, looked to Denise, who had been uncharacteristically silent since the arrival of the two guests. Her expression gave no hint

of a desire for a private consultation with her husband; she was leaving the decision solely to him. Unusual. He considered what her reaction might be to each of his choices, searched for alternatives, found none, and went for his coat.

They took his car. Barbara rode in the front with Kubiak; Watts sat in the backseat, leaning forward smack in its center so the reflection of his head took up most of the rearview mirror. Kubiak's only stipulation had been that Denise stay home. For a change, she'd had no leverage to argue otherwise, and while she might have considered a late night run to a crime scene nothing more than an adventure, Kubiak preferred she not tag along when there was yet to be any police presence at that scene, not to mention the fact he was being led to it by relative strangers who still refused to divulge all its characteristics.

Barbara sat silent, hands folded in her lap, while Watts, gripping the backs of both front seats, muttered a running string of "straight here, turn left up there" directions, despite Kubiak's already having told him twice that he knew where they were headed. He had passed the old Emerald Theatre a hundred times, though he had never been in it. He never had cared for live theater, anyway, certainly never had been curious about the occasional obscure play that would cause the doors of this building, with its cheap bills plastered along its stained brick walls, to be opened a few weekends every few months.

They were there in minutes, might even have walked the distance had it been a clear summer night. Kubiak parked across the street in a spot slightly more legal than Watts's suggestion. The rain had let up, the wind had died down, and the three crossed the shiny wet street to the brass-trimmed glass doors underneath the darkened marquee.

Barbara extracted a bulky key ring. Kubiak marveled at the amount of paraphernalia attached to it, wondered how she managed to find a key at all. Inside, the lobby's chandeliers were dark, as were the overheads, so the only light was that coming in through the front doors from the street, the droplets of water on their glass throwing even darker speckles over everything inside. Barbara led them the ten paces to the doors to the orchestra section, stopped, and let Kubiak enter first.

The theater proper wasn't much brighter, with the overheads dimmed low and the stage forty rows down lit only by a bare, incandescent bulb burning in a shadeless lamp beside a stack of chairs near the curtain on its right side. A single chair sat smack in the stage's center, and beside it was a flat pile of cloth that just might

have been a body. Kubiak began to work his way down the aisle to find out, when Barbara, who had moved off to his left, hit a switch on the light- and soundboard, and a bank of stage lights attached to the front of the balcony over their heads lit the scene on the stage so brilliantly he didn't need to continue, though he did anyway.

In the back of his mind, he had been entertaining the notion this whole thing might be nothing more than actors pulling pranks on actors. By the time he reached the front row he knew it was anything but. Standing beside the orchestra pit, the stage floor was level with his belt. Janet Rydell's body lay just beyond arm's length, the soles of her sneakers aimed directly at him. She was wearing shorts and a T-shirt and was lying bent, less on her side than on her stomach. Barbara had described her as in her fifties or sixties, and Kubiak would have found it difficult to guess which just now. Barbara also had described her as lying in a pool of blood, though it was hardly that, as Rydell had streaked it all about her in her vain attempts to get up from where she had fallen. It was smeared over her white T-shirt, the pale skin of her legs, arms, and face, crusted in her hair. Bloody smudges on the chair's metal legs marked where the fingers of her left hand had groped for leverage up. But Kubiak's attention was drawn to the bloodstained fingers of her right hand.

"You said you wanted to be sure she was dead," the voice of Watts sounded close behind him, startling him as much as the ringing of his phone in the silent apartment had earlier. "If you had any doubt—"

The young man made a move to climb up on the stage. Kubiak put out a hand, told him to wait, asked if either of them had been up on it yet. Both said they hadn't, and he told them to keep it that way. Barbara had come up beside him, so close he thought she might clutch his hand.

"Her eyes," she said. "I can't stand to look at her eyes."

Indeed, Rydell's eyes were open wide, staring grotesquely at that finger of her own right hand, at the task she had been at just before she passed away. With whatever strength she had left, she had dipped her finger into her blood, and had used it to ink out four letters on the wood floor: BOBO

"Bobo," Kubiak said. "What's a bobo, either of you have any idea?"

"I'm a bobo," Barbara answered. "I mean, I am Bobo. It's my nickname. Everybody calls me that. But I don't know why she would . . . How could she possibly . . . ?"

"She called you that as well?"

Barbara nodded, eyes squeezed shut. Watts had crossed to her, and just in time, as she crumpled into him and the tears began.

"You might have thought to mention this particular detail," Kubiak said.

"Are you kidding?" Watts said. "It's just what we couldn't tell you, or you never would have come here. Of course, Rydell didn't write that. Whoever killed her climbed up on stage, took hold of her hand, and wrote it himself. That's obvious, isn't it?"

Actually, it was anything but. Kubiak looked to either side of the stage, at the dark behind the curtains, up at the black ceiling a good forty feet above, back down at the glaring scene so stark on stage, felt the weight of the vast, silent theater behind the three tiny live bodies in it.

"You still have that phone?" he asked Barbara.

Of course, it was hanging from her key ring. Watts took it from her, hesitated before handing it over. "You're planning on calling the cops after all."

"Not the cops," Kubiak said, taking the phone. "A cop. There's this old acquaintance of mine . . ."

"Theater people," Crawford muttered, dropping into the seat beside Kubiak. "It isn't enough drama you get yourself killed center stage, you've got to bring down the house with a dying message in your own blood. Outrageous."

They were sitting in the theater's second to last row, near the aisle, in about the same seats Watts and Barbara had told Kubiak they had occupied while discussing what to do before coming to see him. It was the last thing they had told him, as the three had been separated when the police arrived. Barbara had been seated in the first row on the opposite side of the theater; Watts was somewhere above, up in the balcony.

Crawford had arrived a good two hours after the first responding officers. The lieutenant looked fresher than Kubiak felt. Of course, Kubiak had woken him only a couple of hours before he normally got up, and at this hour Crawford would have been well into his day at his office in Police Headquarters on South Michigan, anyway, as it was nearly eight.

"You told them we were friends," Crawford added. "Don't you think you should have checked with me first?"

"I said you were an acquaintance. I wanted to give them some window of hope. They were ready to run."

"I can understand why."

"Is there any?"

"Hope? Not if your nickname is Bobo there's not." Crawford sighed. "This place." He waved his hand. "It's not where I'd want to finish an acting career, but I suppose it's where you have to start."

A tough break, as they say, some hard-headed old biddy squelching that just because she takes a dislike to you."

"There are other theaters," Kubiak said. "And better motives."

"There are and there are. Young Bobo might have considered going back to school, maybe performing in some university's basement where she could tell all her friends that she once upon a time had her foot in the door performing on the fringe of Chicago's theater district, two stops short of New York's Broadway, until some old woman slammed that door shut. Some option."

"You make it sound like there was premeditation."

"No, just more animosity than you're willing to admit. You talk to the boyfriend five minutes, it's plain enough. And don't forget, that pretty young thing with the tears in her eyes is a professional actress, even if only part time. She's probably a good one, too, if she managed to play you for a sucker, which she did. Oh, don't worry, Kubiak, I know the tears weren't the only reason you called me instead of dialing 911. You felt you owed her something simply because she came to you for help, figured by dropping her in my lap I'd give her the benefit of the doubt for the sake of our old friendship."

"Acquaintanceship."

"Of course I wouldn't, but you could fool yourself into thinking you'd done all you could, at least sleep soundly by keeping me from doing so. But it was a losing proposition from the start. This is about as simple a case of homicide as I've run across in months, complicated only by the deliberate actions Leigh and her boyfriend took afterward. She stated to four witnesses her intention to come here and confront the victim, and then did so. She had access to the gun most likely used, and I'd tell you all about that except I don't have the time or the inclination, though it does open up the door to premeditation. My guess is she only intended to use it to threaten, was leaving in a huff when she decided to turn back around and get the last word in by putting five bullets into Rydell because she was standing in the aisle at least six rows back. Only three of the bullets landed, but they did the trick. Leigh panicked, got her boyfriend. They came back to make sure Rydell was dead, found out Rydell had been busy scribbling in their absence, so they sat and concocted a scheme."

"Simple enough," Kubiak said. "Except the two of them were sitting right here doing it. Why didn't they at some point concoct simply to walk down and scrub Bobo's name off the stage?"

"I'm sure they did but decided against it. People watch these crime scene shows on TV these days, they're smarter than that. Any tampering with the scene, Leigh would have to deny she came here

when she had already announced her plan to. And there was no tampering. There was no one up on that stage but Rydell, Kubiak. The dust on the floor from the set construction guarantees at least that much. Nobody came down from the ceiling on the curtain fly system. Nobody was set up. There was just Rydell, all by herself, who, bless her, did us the great favor as she was dying, of fingering the woman who killed her. No pun intended."

"That's funny. You should do vaudeville, Crawford, except you're not supposed to practice in the last row of the audience."

"No, that's reserved for hecklers, so I'll leave you here. Better yet, go home before somebody finds a reason to keep you from doing so. Your actions may have been technically— Hey, hold on there!" And Crawford was up and heading toward the doors to the lobby through which Paul Volti had come storming into the theater against the protests of the uniformed officer flanking him.

The four core members of the theater company, Mike Morris, Pamela Lipinski, Jeri Hall, and Volti, had arrived about an hour earlier and had been kept confined to the lobby or the street outside. Because of Kubiak's seat location and the fact that the lobby door was occasionally left propped open, he had learned that each had arrived separately for an appointed seven A.M. gathering, each had been informed of Rydell's death in turn, and after expressing their initial shock, each had had a different take on what step be taken next. Lipinski, the oldest in the group, somewhere in her early forties but with a face and figure for the camera, wearing narrow glasses that only made her look younger, kept insisting that they be allowed to see Barbara, or at least Watts, immediately. Morris, tall and equally good looking but still in his late twenties, concentrated his efforts on keeping control of, and giving comfort to, the immediate group, reasoning with Lipinski and trying to quiet Volti. Kubiak had yet to get a glimpse of Jeri Hall, but he had heard her referred to more than once as "young lady," and her responses to the reference, coming in a voice so soft he wondered how she could possibly project it to the back of a theater, made it clear she was content to let Morris run interference.

Volti, on the other hand, could be heard most anywhere in the building and was more often than not. Also in his twenties, wiry, wearing a baseball cap and a beard so sparse most men would have shaved it off out of embarrassment, he had yet to tire of expressing indignation over the fact that the theater his company was renting had been taken over by the police and that he and his friends were the only ones not being given the freedom to move about within it. He was doing so again now as Crawford blocked his progress down the aisle. Crawford spoke to him softly but

sternly, and Volti eventually quieted, perhaps because of Crawford's powers of persuasion, or just as likely because he was finally getting a direct view down at the corpse of the woman he was accustomed to seeing in that same spot every day, only very much alive.

Other heads poked in through the doors. Crawford, exasperated, ushered everyone back out to the lobby, then ordered them out to the street. More protests. When could they talk to Barbara? How long would this take? Mike Morris ran interference again, saying they could kill some time while the police finished up, maybe breakfast down the street at The Copper Kettle where they could be reached.

Kubiak sat back in his chair in the audience, checked his watch. They had let him phone Denise, but he imagined her still pacing, anxious and curious. He now regretted insisting she stay home; better for her to be bored here with him. And he didn't know what he might have to offer her upon his return. After all, he had left on a mission to save her hairdresser. To return having cut Bobo Leigh loose with nothing by way of explanation but shrugs and shakes of his head . . .

He looked down at the front row, noticed Barbara was gone. For how long now? She probably had been whisked over to District 19. And Watts? Who knew? Questioned and released? He would have to settle for sketches in tomorrow's paper. Or would he?

The Copper Kettle was an old-school coffee shop, all Formica, the clatter of spoons, and the smell of mop water. The group of four had settled at a table near the front. Their apprehension as Kubiak pulled up a chair faded when he explained how he had come to be there and provided the details of Barbara's night they had been so anxious to hear. He ordered coffee, eggs, and bacon, answered the questions he could, finished with those shrugs and shakes of his head.

Jeri Hall gave a visible shudder. She was Barbara's age and nearly as pretty but was shorter and had jet black hair that fell in clouds over her shoulders.

"So it's true, then?" she asked in that soft voice. "She really did write Bobo's name in her own blood as she was dying?"

Morris shook his head. "You've got to hand it to Janet. She always was a rock."

"I don't believe it," Pamela Lipinski said.

"Which part?" Morris asked her.

"Any of it."

"Well, we're here. And Janet's in there. You think the cops—"

"I think they're wrong. I think it's most likely some crackhead broke into the theater last night and killed Janet. I mean, it certainly makes more sense than poor Bobo doing it."

"Afraid not," Volti said. He was still wearing the baseball cap but had quieted, was playing sullenly with what was left of the food on his plate. "I was given the impression there was no sign of a break-in. And even if there had been, what was your crackhead after? The cops didn't say anything was missing but the gun."

"Besides, Pam, think about it," Jeri Hall added, less arguing a point than gently offering a suggestion. "Janet didn't scratch out 'crackhead' in her own blood. As troubled as her and Bobo's relationship was, I can't imagine her doing that to Bobo if Bobo didn't . . . Oh, I can't even say it, much less think it."

"About that gun," Kubiak said. "It was here in the theater?"

"Yes," Morris volunteered.

"I'm guessing the police think it was the one used on Rydell."

"From what we gather. They won't tell us anything outright."

"What kind of gun was it?"

"I don't know. A pistol. A revolver, I think." He looked around for a second opinion, got a nod from Pam Lipinski.

"What was it doing here?"

"It was a prop, is all. Kept with the rest down in the basement. It's the genuine article, though. We only used it loaded with blanks for the occasional play. It's been a while. When was the last time, Paul, that cowboy farce two summers back?"

"No," Volti muttered, still playing with his food. "You shot me with it last Christmas in *Murder Runs Afoul*."

"Oh, that's right. I forgot about that. Or tried my best to." He turned to Kubiak. "That one was mine. The play, I mean. I wrote and directed it. Hardly my best effort." Back to the group: "Old Janet was upset about pulling the chairs out of the orchestra section pit. You remember her face the second weekend of that disaster."

The memory brought a round of chuckles, even prompted a smile on Volti's face. Kubiak asked about the chairs, and each took a turn giving him an explanation. Evidently, the theater's front row was not necessarily that. If a play didn't use an orchestra, the floor of their pit could be raised and a couple of rows of folding chairs placed in it, commanding a premium view at a premium price. There had been some interest in purchasing them for opening night of this weekend's play, but the deal had fallen through.

"Funny time of day to be moving around chairs," Kubiak said.

"Not if you're Janet," Pam Lipinski offered.

"Were Janet," Volti added.

"Stop it, Paul," she said, and he did, pushing away his plate with a sigh and pulling a toothpick out of his pocket. Lipinski gave each of the group a den mother's stare before adjusting her glasses and continuing to Kubiak, "Janet was tireless. Of course, all the heavy lifting is supposed to be done by union, but if that were the case there would never be a play performed at The Emerald. They know we could never afford them, so they pretty much ignore us, let us do what we want."

"Actually," Mike Morris added, "it would have been Janet's job to pay them. It's her theater. Well, really, her nephew's, but she runs everything."

"And every one," Volti said, regaining a bit of his old bravado. "The theater was her passion, and we were her . . . pets? Do I dare use passion and pet in the same sentence when talking about old Rydell?"

Two more glares from Lipinski, one for Volti, the other for Morris. "Whoever's job it would have been to cut a check is irrelevant," she said. "The cost would have been passed on to us. Yes, Janet could be meddlesome at times, but she kept The Emerald open and running. If it weren't for her—"

"Oh, come off it, Pammy." Paul Volti had come back to life. The boom was back in his voice, and in case anyone in the back of the coffee shop might miss it, he slammed the palm of his hand down on the table to command their attention. "Meddlesome? She had her iron fist in everything. 'Alter the script, Miss Rydell? Well, if you really think . . . Change the lead? Well, now that you mention it . . . Only, please don't close those theater doors on us.' The old witch was a tyrant. You said so yourself a hundred times, and again just last night."

"I did not."

"No? Remember what you said just after Bobo left to go see her? Something about a lamb and a pit bull?"

Lipinski's face reddened a touch. Another adjusting of the glasses. "I felt bad for Bobo, is all. After what Janet told me yesterday, I knew that poor Bobo was only heading off into a confrontation that she would regret. It's why I tried to talk her out of going."

"Well, you got the confrontation part right. I don't know about the regret. Look, I feel bad for Bobo too. More than for Rydell. I'm not saying the old spinster deserved to die, only that the world, at least the world of theater, won't suffer for the lack of her. And every one of you would agree with me if it weren't for our company. Mr. . . . What's your name again, buddy?"

"Kubiak."

"Mr. Kubiak, would you mind going down the street for some smokes or something so we can talk?"

"Go ahead and talk. I'm the guy Barbara came to for help, remember?"

"Yeah, so you say."

"You want me to get her boyfriend on the line to verify?"

"Watts? That pit bull? I'd rather talk to a serpent."

Morris stepped in again. "Look, we're all on Bobo's side, but what can we do except what the cops tell us? We can talk all we want, but we've got a show to put on in thirty-six hours."

"Mike, you've got to be kidding," Jeri Hall protested. "Janet's still lying there, and you're talking about going ahead with the play?"

"Half the tickets are already sold, Jeri."

"Maybe we could leave her there," Volti suggested, one eye fixed on Kubiak. "Old Rydell always wanted to do a one-woman show. I don't suppose at this point she'd mind doing it facedown. What with all the publicity we're about to get, I imagine people would rather see that than what we've been rehearsing. A little docu-drama. What do you think, Mr. Kubiak? Would you be interested in a walk-on role? Fifty dollars a night, and you only have to share a dressing room with the gentlemen."

"He actually joked about a walk-on role, with the woman's body still warm on the stage just down the block?"

"By the time I left them, I'm not so sure it was a joke."

Kubiak was shaving. Denise stood leaning against the bathroom door's jamb, her arms folded, her eyes fixed on nothing in particular as she took in what her husband had been telling her.

"How much longer was that?" she asked.

"Another hour or so. And Rydell's body was cold enough at that point. I will give them credit for waiting that long before seriously mulling over how they might use the press they're going to get from this."

"They're theater people. It's all about them."

"Yes, and so is Barbara Leigh, don't forget, and my day and night have been all about her."

"But Barbara isn't like that."

"If she could sit at a table with those four without having to, she certainly is. Good Lord, the gossipy chatter. It only got worse as they grew accustomed to my presence. Oddly enough, the only one I could tolerate at all was that scraggly Paul Volti."

"Why, because he was so candid?"

"He was that." Kubiak brought the razor to his chin, stopped, pondered. "I suppose he bothers to shave when he has a part on

stage. He's directing this production. Aside from Jeri Hall who strictly acts, they all take turns writing, directing, starring. Morris has the lead role this time. It was his play last Christmas, *Murder Runs Afoul*, when they last used the gun used on Rydell tonight.

"Murder runs afoul of what?"

"You know, that's the one question I didn't ask."

"Now that you mention it, I remember Barbara telling me she was set to play the lead in the production just before she and Rydell had their falling out."

"Well, that won't do her any good. What else did she tell you down at the hairdresser's about her relation with Rydell?"

"Pretty much what you told me the rest of them said, that Rydell was a small-minded woman who had too much power and that she was impossible to deal with unless you agreed with her. I also got the impression she had a particular dislike for young, pretty girls."

"I heard that same line from Jeri Hall, concerning herself, of course, once she got over her thirty-minute period of mourning. But it was worse than that with Barbara. Apparently, Rydell was seeking an order of protection against her and her boyfriend, Watts. She was that afraid of retaliation for cutting Barbara out of the picture."

"So the parting of ways wasn't as mutual as Barbara let on?"

"She wasn't exactly fired," Kubiak said. "She did leave on her own, but only because she figured the cut was coming, and she was being driven out anyway by the riding she was getting from Rydell for every little thing as the animus built. According to Lipinski, who was the one who kept in closest touch with them both, Barbara regretted leaving from the minute she walked out of the theater and began hounding Rydell the next day. But Rydell wanted nothing to do with her."

"Still, an order of protection? Did Barbara ever threaten her?"

"She said some things to the others; apparently it got back to Rydell. I'm not surprised." Kubiak dried his face, left the bathroom, crossed the bedroom to the closet. Denise followed.

"So what do you think?" she asked. "Not how does it look, but what do you think?"

"I think it's about the way it looks." He removed his shoes. "Especially with Barbara already indicted by the woman she shot."

"You don't think it's possible Rydell was trying to write out something else?"

"What? Something cryptic that just happens to have the same four letters of the the name of the woman she had an order of protection against? No. There is one possibility, though. I doubt anything will come of it, and Barbara won't like it. I did, however,

phone Crawford and mention it to him."

"How could Barbara not like it?"

"Think about it. You should have it all figured by the time I wake up."

"You're going to bed? You just shaved."

"Well, with starlets dropping by at any hour of the day I have to look my best at all times. By the way, besides telling Barbara I used to work for the Chicago PD, what sorts of things did you and Bobo discuss about me during those long sessions under the hair dryer?"

"Only the most exemplary. Why?"

"I'm only sure Crawford will have a crack at her during the interrogation, and I'd hate for him to learn anything that might come back at me."

Kubiak slept fitfully for two hours, during which there was no call back from Crawford. He showered, found Denise deep asleep in the front room's reclining chair, went back to the bedroom, called information, got a number, dialed it.

The name of Janet Rydell's nephew, the theater's owner, had been brought up a few times at the coffee shop. George Warner had an office downtown, but considering the circumstances, Kubiak reached him, understandably, at his home in suburban Hoffman Estates. Kubiak explained who he was and why he was calling. Warner, sounding more puzzled than apprehensive, agreed to see him.

The drive out on the expressway took under an hour. Warner's home was one of those enormous brick houses that might have passed for stately had it not been squeezed into a tightly curved mini subdivision where every other house was deliberately unique though of the same size and type. Inside, an extended family of under a dozen was gathered in a spacious recreation room under a vaulted ceiling. The mood, naturally, was somber, though the television was on for the children. The food was catered. There was no sign of alcohol.

"Crazy Aunt Janet," Warner muttered, shooing away one of his toddlers and leading Kubiak into a breakfast nook off the kitchen where they could talk alone. "Never moved out of the city her entire life. Imagine that."

"Crazy."

"We only saw her on the major holidays. She was a true old hippie, hanging out with those Bohemian types since the days they were all beatniks. But she loved what she was doing, and I'll miss her sorely. She kept the old Emerald up and running, gave me one less thing to worry about. She had a part-time job in a vintage clothing

store, lived off that and the salary I paid her, gave me more than my money's worth with the time she put in at that theater. Bringing culture to the masses, though not much in the way of masses."

"What do you plan to do with The Emerald now?"

"Nothing. If I shutter the place, it'll be a drain, and it isn't worth selling just yet. The neighborhood is still too Bohemian. But it's gentrifying fast, faster than I expected. I used to think it would be twenty-five years easy before I'd get a pretty penny for the theater, now I'm guessing ten to fifteen. So I'll let the kids go on performing their plays and running the occasional movies, paying the taxes for me. My only immediate problem is hiring somebody to manage the place. Of course, nobody could replace Aunt Janet. All she did for those scrappy little alley cats and one of them goes and kills her. I'll never understand it."

"Jimmy, were you aware that there are people who live their entire lives in the city of Chicago?"

"Yeah, everybody I know. What's your point?"

Kubiak had stopped at Jimmy Dee's thinking he wanted a beer, as the sun was setting and it was happy hour. But he had been awake too short a time to work up a taste for alcohol, so he ordered a tonic instead, prompting a look of concern from Jimmy, which the last comment didn't help erase. He asked for the phone, got it handed to him, dialed Crawford's number. When he didn't connect, he declined to leave a message, instead hung up and called Mike Morris, whose number he had gotten that morning. Morris wasn't answering either, so he went to the next number down the list, Pam Lipinski's, and connected.

She didn't mind answering a few more questions despite Kubiak's inability to update her on Barbara's status. Yes, the group of four had met last night at around eleven, which was more than typical. They met every Wednesday night at the same bar for beers, trickling in around that time. Hops on hump night, they called it, when they caught up on each others' week and planned for the weekend. Casual, growing a bit more lengthy and intense when approaching the occasional weekend production.

"So," Kubiak said, "that's how Barbara knew to find you there?"

"Yes. We were all surprised to see her, though. Bobo hadn't joined us for some weeks. You know how it is, with her not there for rehearsals and daytime meetings, she just fell out of the loop. I mean, she'd join us at the table: 'Hey, gang, how's the play coming along?' Well, we'd be going on about that subject for hours, days, and would be so thick into it I'm sure she sensed she was more of an interruption. She had been spending her Wednesdays at her

boyfriend's instead, watching TV of all things. They're into one of those reality shows where people get voted off, and are pretty religious about not missing it. But she said that at the last minute some friends of hers asked her along to a one-evening seminar, some computer something. They were driving her home afterward and passed by the bar. She asked them to drop her."

"What about Rydell?"

"What about her? Oh, no, Janet seldom joined us. She didn't drink much. Paul always, at some point, toasted to the one night free of her. I think that's why he was always the first one there."

"When was the last time you saw her?"

"So we're back to that." A sigh. Kubiak pictured her adjusting her glasses. "Late that afternoon. Jeri, Mike, and I met her at the theater. We still had some set work to do, some light wood that needed to be trimmed and painted."

"Where was Volti?"

"I don't know. Work, I suppose. We could have used his hands, but attendance wasn't mandatory."

"You left Rydell there?"

"No. We all left together."

"She went to her job?"

"Yes, at the clothing store. So you know about that. She said she was going back to The Emerald after the store closed at nine, like she usually did, to finish up and move those chairs. But I've been through all this with the police, why are we going over it again?"

Kubiak never did order that beer, instead tipped Jimmy more generously than he ought to have considering the surly service he was getting on account of his decision to stay dead sober, left, and drove the remaining two blocks to his apartment building, parked, decided on a lark to check the mail, which meant going through the main lobby, where he passed Purcell stationed at the front desk.

"Just to give you a heads up," Purcell told him as he waited for the elevator, "that pretty girl is back."

"Upstairs?"

"Yes. She seems sweet enough, aside from the ornaments drilled into her face, but she's even more agitated than she was last night. What's her story?"

"Is her boyfriend with her?"

"No."

"Then I can guess."

He spent the short ride up to seven preparing his defenses. The reception he got upon entering the apartment, however, was more cold than antagonistic. Barbara was back on the couch with another rum and Coke, though without anyone's arm over her shoulders.

Her eyes were puffy. Denise was on her feet and remained so. She was volunteering nothing, so Barbara was the one to confirm what he suspected: The police had Watts.

"Is he under arrest?" Kubiak asked her.

"I don't know," Barbara said. She took one of those long swallows of her drink before launching into yet another of her convoluted discourses, leaving Kubiak to piece together the series of events. She had spent most of the day in an interrogation room, was released around mid afternoon with only warnings, no explanations, had spent an hour trying to locate her boyfriend, finally got hold of his mother who told her Watts had been brought into Area Three headquarters to answer a few questions and had not come out. No one was telling them anything.

"So what do we do now?" she finished, looking from Kubiak to Denise and back.

After a pause, Denise answered flatly, "We may have already done too much."

"What do you mean?" Barbara asked, understandably blindsided by the comment and the tone, as Kubiak was certain Denise had offered nothing but consolation in his absence. "Don't say that."

Denise finally requested that private consultation Kubiak had expected last night. She asked Barbara if she would be all right alone, promised she would be back in just a minute or two for more consoling, then led Kubiak down the hall to the bedroom.

"You warned me Barbara wouldn't like it," she said, closing the door behind them. "Well, neither do I. Crawford finally called back."

"Oh?"

"Don't play stupid. The only thing keeping you out of the dog-house is that he claims he didn't need your learned counsel, that he was working the boyfriend angle from the start."

"He would claim that. So did he say if Watts was at home when Barbara phoned him after she found the body?"

"He wasn't. Watts's story now is that when Barbara stood him up at the last minute . . . You do know they had a regular date on Wednesdays?"

"I understood they stayed home and watched television. If you call that a date, then what the two of us do nearly every night—"

"Anyway, Watts decided, at his last minute, to hang out with some buddies of his that Barbara is not too fond of, which is why he lied to her about being home. He supposedly was in a club in Wicker Park with those friends when Barbara's call came on his cell phone, but so far the police haven't found the friends to verify it. And according to Crawford, it's looking more and more like Janet Rydell just might have been killed before Barbara found her."

"And," Kubiak added, "Watts could have made a copy of Barbara's key to the theater at any time, which would have given him previous access to the gun, and while Barbara was more upset, he was more angry and so more likely to commit the crime, unaware that she would decide, at her next last minute, to go to the theater to confront Rydell."

"Case closed. Congratulations, Kubiak, you finally cleared someone of a murder charge without going to the bother of herding a group of suspects together to get it done. I only wish you had found some other perpetrator, for Barbara's sake."

"I'm sorry, it was the only other thing I could come up with on short notice that would explain Rydell scribbling Barbara's name. If it was Watts, Rydell would know the reason he was there was to avenge his girlfriend, perhaps even was sent by her, and so she would naturally spell out Barbara's name. But I didn't clear anyone of anything. I only thought Crawford was moving too quickly against Barbara, so I put the nugget of an idea in his head when I phoned him."

"Still, it was your nugget. It would be one thing if you were certain Watts murdered the woman, but you can't possibly be. And now we have this poor girl on our couch . . . I'll ask you the same question she did. What do we do now?"

"Well, you could begin by hiding the rum. The way she's going at it—"

"That's not funny. You've been gone all afternoon, you haven't dug up any other nuggets?"

"Actually, I have. Four more, but the thing keeping me from entertaining them is Rydell, herself. She made it pretty clear who she wanted indicted for her murder, and as Jeri Hall said, you don't lie about that just because of some grudge."

"You wouldn't think of turning this back on Barbara? She's already hinted she'd be willing to confess to the murder if it would clear Watts. I won't let her do that."

"Fine. Don't let her. She's your hairdresser, not mine. My barber is Tony, and if he were to kill anyone I'd read about it in the morning papers, then go find another barber."

"I don't believe that for a minute. And don't throw this back at me. I didn't pressure you last night to take up Barbara's case. I deliberately left you free to make your own decision. But, since you did take it up, it's your responsibility. . . . Where are you going?"

"To Jimmy Dee's," he said, opening the bedroom door, "where I can juggle my nuggets in peace. While I'm gone, you two go ahead and keep asking each other what we do now, maybe you'll come up with an answer by the time I get back."

He was aimed with determination for the front door, so he barely gave Barbara a glance as he approached it. She had risen from the couch and was staring out the window, standing at the same spot he had been last night when he first saw her as she climbed out of the taxi.

"What did he decide?" she asked without turning to face him, her voice small, her drink clutched at her chest. Holding the pose, Kubiak thought. Still the actress even now.

"He decided he doesn't care for rum," he told her, "so he's going for beer."

She jumped at hearing the voice was his, turned. "I'm sorry," she said. "I thought—"

But he knew what she thought as he stormed through the door. She was expecting Denise with more assurances. No doubt there had been promises along with the consolations while he was gone: "Don't worry, dear, I'll take him into the back and shame him into getting your boyfriend cleared if I have to, send the old man back out to find someone else to pin the murder on, work down the list until we're all satisfied. You just stay here shivering and looking helpless."

Actors, all of them, and everyone with a script save Kubiak.

The elevator was slow as ever. When it finally did arrive, his anger had subsided and he was able to laugh at Barbara's gaffe, at the expression on her face. The ride down seemed longer than the one up, and he watched the floor numbers blink on, off, on, off.

What she thought . . .

On. Off. On.

By the time he reached the lobby, he was no longer laughing.

"Are you all right?" Purcell asked, reacting to the expression on his face.

"I'm not sure," Kubiak told him, after a moment. "Actually, I think I may have been all wrong from the start."

But no more wrong than the victim herself.

Getting the members of the theater company together turned out to be easier than he had expected. Because of a lingering police presence at The Emerald, and perhaps even a sense of decency, opening night of the latest play was put off until the next weekend, leaving the theater empty Saturday night. The four, Lipinski, Volti, Morris, and Hall, had planned to meet there anyway, and according to Pam Lipinski, each was anxious to see Barbara, who had been holed up in the Kubiaks' apartment since her arrival Thursday night. So they were happy to have Kubiak join them as long as he brought her along, even agreed to answer more of his questions about the night Rydell was killed.

They hadn't expected Crawford. At one point, neither had Kubiak. The lieutenant had scoffed when Kubiak had explained why he preferred he be present, so when he agreed to show up, Kubiak guessed the case against Watts was growing weaker, though Crawford claimed otherwise.

As Barbara's key to the lobby was still in a police evidence locker, Kubiak asked Lipinski to arrive an hour early to let in himself, Barbara, and Denise, who at this point was not about to leave Barbara's side. When Lipinski asked why, he told her he wanted to move around some chairs, which he did while Denise kept an eye on Barbara and Lipinski, who busied themselves in the front row catching up on the past seventy-two hours. He placed five chairs in the center of the stage, found a folding table and dragged it up to the stage, then placed the chairs around it. He then located that shadeless table lamp, set it up where it had been burning when he had walked in on Rydell's body, and set all the lights in the theater to where they had been at that point. Finally he went to the lobby and made a phone call to complete his preparations.

Volti arrived first, loud and animated as ever. He immediately demanded to know just what that table and chairs were doing on stage, then ignored Lipinski and her explanation as he spied Barbara and hurried to give her a bear hug that lifted her off her feet. Mike Morris entered a few minutes later, offering greetings a bit more subdued, followed by Crawford, who offered even less. Next came Warner, Rydell's nephew, with polite handshakes for the "scrappy alley cats." A good fifteen minutes then passed before Jeri Hall dragged in with apologies, and it was another ten before the chatter played itself out and Morris asked Kubiak just what he was up to.

"You mean," Morris asked, after Kubiak explained, "you physically want us to sit at this table? I don't see the point."

"I'd prefer you in the same chairs you were in around that table in the bar when Barbara joined you Wednesday night," Kubiak told him. "It isn't necessary, but you have to sit somewhere, and it might help with your recollection of the evening."

"Why couldn't we have just met at the bar, then?"

"A number of reasons, beginning with too many distractions. The same table might not be open, and there are a few of us here who weren't at the table that night."

After about the amount of grumbling Kubiak had expected, there was much shuffling about the table. At one point, Volti got elbowed by Jeri Hall when he tried to take the chair beside Lipinski. Both ordered him to the next available seat.

"I swear this wasn't where I was," he boomed. "You know I never

sit with my back to the bar's door. But where is the door? Can I get some stage direction here?"

Finally, the four were seated. Kubiak stood a few paces back with Barbara at his side. Denise, Crawford, and Warner were seated off to the side of the stage, Crawford alternately grunting and chuckling at the spectacle.

"I don't like it," Jeri Hall said, squirming in her seat. "We're sitting right over the spot where Janet . . . where she . . ."

So, Kubiak thought, at least one of them noticed.

"It's just silly, is all," Volti grunted, and aimed his chin at Kubiak. "If we're going to play games, why is it you making up the rules?"

"If we're going to play this game," Kubiak told him, "I hope you can do better than you've shown so far. It's your recollection I'm counting on. You're all actors, you're accustomed to remembering lines and saying them back. I only want you to replay the few minutes after Barbara met you Wednesday night."

"But, why?" Morris demanded. "We all told the police—"

"The police interviewed each of you separately, which is their way, and is generally most effective at getting at the truth. I think in this case, though, we might get at the truth a little quicker if we do it together. For instance, Mr. Volti, you said you never sit with your back to the door. Were you the first to see Barbara enter?"

"Oh, how would I know? I suppose. Let's say I was."

"No," Jeri Hall said. "It was me. Remember? I didn't notice her until she was just a few feet away, and I blurted out her name. Pammy, she was right behind you. You stood up and gave her a hug."

Kubiak told Barbara to go ahead and take her seat at the table. She seemed reluctant to leave his side, but she did, and approached the group with an expression on her face that conveyed to her friends this wasn't her idea. Lipinski asked Kubiak if he wanted her to stand and hug Barbara, and he told her that was entirely up to her. Volti muttered something about more lack of stage direction.

Over the next few minutes, the group pieced together the conversation in a jigsaw puzzle manner that made Kubiak long for Barbara's convoluted renditions. Lipinski had asked Barbara why she wasn't with her boyfriend, and Barbara had explained. Volti had said something about Watts that he had the good grace not to repeat now; he had been chastised for it by Lipinski, then he had gone to get Barbara a beer.

He rose from the table, eyeing Kubiak the way he had the other day, crossed to the side of the stage, went through the motions of ordering a drink in exaggerated pantomime, provoking a chuckle from only Morris. The others carried on. They had talked about

the play. Hall, whose memory seemed keenest, had brought up a weekend trip to Michigan she had planned. Lipinski had talked about her cats.

"Two tabbies," Volti bellowed to Kubiak from his invisible bar. "Not your typical segue from a trip to Michigan, but that's how conversations tend to go around here. I don't know if you've had your fill of it yet—"

"I know I have," Morris said, standing. "This entire—"

"Who brought up the fact that Janet Rydell was here finishing up work?" Kubiak interrupted.

"I don't know," Morris said. "What does it matter?"

"It matters. Come on, Mr. Morris, you haven't chimed in yet on a single point of conversation. You must remember something of that night. Who was the first to mention to Barbara that Rydell was here?"

"I honestly don't remember." He shrugged, and when no one else offered anything added, "If I had to guess, I'd say it was Pamela. Right, Pammy? I mean, it was you always trying to get the two of them back together."

"Not that night I wasn't."

"No, I recall now. You asked Bobo if she had made any headway in patching things up. Then you mentioned that we had spent the afternoon with Rydell, and that she was going back to the The Emerald after work."

Lipinski blinked, pushed those glasses back along the bridge of her nose, looked around the table. "But I'm sure I didn't."

"No," Kubiak said to her. "You didn't. In fact, in the coffee shop the other morning you said you had even warned Barbara against going to the theater. So who was suggesting otherwise besides Barbara? Come on, one of you must remember. All of you—"

"It was you, Mike," Jeri Hall interjected in that small voice that could only suggest, never accuse. She was staring up at Morris, her eyes narrow as she searched her memory. "You brought it up twice. You even offered to drive Bobo because of the rain."

"Did I? Then why don't I remember that? And what difference does it make anyway?"

"It makes all the difference," Kubiak told him. "Barbara and Watts came to me claiming she was set up, and they were right. When the tensions between Rydell and Barbara, fueled no doubt by the kind of gossip passed around your Wednesday night tables, got high enough to cause Rydell to seek an order of protection against Barbara, the opportunity arose to finally get the meddlesome Ms. Rydell out of the way of all your aspirations and have the murder pinned on Barbara. Any Wednesday night would be best,

as the killer could shoot Rydell just before he came to meet you all here, knowing that Barbara's alibi that she was with her boyfriend watching television is about as weak as an alibi gets.

"But he chose the wrong Wednesday night. Imagine the look on his face when, sitting at the table only minutes after committing the murder, Barbara, out of the blue, walked into the bar and announced that she had spent the entire evening with friends at a seminar. Well, you all don't have to imagine it, do you? If you'll recall, you all saw it on Mr. Morris's face. Of course, you didn't know it for what it was at the time, just as his anxiousness to send Barbara to The Emerald didn't arouse your suspicions that night because you didn't know Rydell was lying there dead. But you do now, and you realize, just as he did, that the only thing he could do to save himself was to get Barbara to that theater alone before the body was discovered, which he did manage to do. And you were all witnesses to his doing it."

There was a smile plastered on Morris's face that wouldn't have gotten him a gig in a high school play. He turned it on Barbara, and she shivered the way she had on Kubiak's couch that first night.

"I do remember you offering the ride, Mike," she said weakly, almost apologetically. "I thought about it all along the walk to The Emerald while I was getting drenched in the rain."

"Oh, this is so meaningless," Morris protested. He turned to Crawford. "Lieutenant, please?" But Crawford offered him nothing. He turned to Volti, but Volti had quieted.

"Actually, old buddy," Volti said, "I now recall your pressing the point awfully hard. But I'm sure . . . well . . ."

"*Et tu, brother?*" Morris dismissed him, turned back to Kubiak. "Some fun game you picked. Unfortunately, all it really proves is that I was the only gentleman in the bar that night, or the only one with a car."

"No," Kubiak said. "What it does is give the investigation the next direction to go in once Barbara and Watts are cleared."

"But I understand Watts isn't cleared. And as for Bobo, aren't we all forgetting about her name that Janet managed to scrawl before she died? Or is that not as incriminating as a gentleman offering a lady a ride on a rainy night?"

"Yes," Kubiak said, "that was a little bonus you hadn't figured on. My apologies, Mr. Warner. I've already referred to your aunt once as meddlesome, but she did live up to that reputation even in death, as her actions only complicated matters."

"But it was obvious from the start the killing couldn't have gone down the way Mr. Morris arranged to have it appear—to his credit, it was only a backup tactic hastily prepared—because there would

have had to have been premeditation. Barbara would have had to have the gun with her already, which means she had previously rummaged around backstage for it and then gone to the trouble of loading it with live ammunition, which was not the scenario painted. Now, it was possible her boyfriend, Watts, being a gentleman like Mr. Morris, had arranged to murder Rydell on Barbara's behalf. That was the suggestion I made to Lieutenant Crawford that I now regret doing, which is why I made arrangements to have Mr. Watts released so he might be here with us tonight."

"Like hell you did." The exclamation came from Crawford, who rose from his chair.

"I figured you wouldn't be convinced of any of this if you weren't here to see for yourself," Kubiak told him. He turned and called out to the back of the theater. "Sir, will you please approach the stage just as I did the night of Rydell's death?"

The stage lights from beneath the balcony blinked on, flooding the stage with white light. Kubiak watched the faces of the group as they squinted out at the still dark orchestra section trying in vain to locate which aisle Watts might be coming down. Barbara jumped to her feet, also searching, shading her eyes with her hand.

"Simon?" she called out, taking two steps forward.

"Go ahead," Kubiak told her, and she did, leaping off the stage into the raised orchestra pit, then disappearing into the shadows beneath the stage lights. She was back in seconds, looking dismayed, being led to the edge of the stage by a beaming Purcell.

"You were expecting someone else, Crawford?" Kubiak asked. "You see, Morris did the same thing Barbara did when she, Watts, and I entered the theater that night: He stopped at the light- and soundboard and threw on those stage lights. Rydell had been working by the light of a single incandescent, and she was shot from six rows back. If she saw anything of her assailant, it was only a shadow, but it was an assault from Barbara she was expecting, so she naturally assumed it was her."

No one said anything for a moment. Then the silence was broken by a single clap of Mike Morris's hands, followed by a forced laugh as he plopped himself back down in his chair.

"Well, well," he said. "Nice theater, Mr. Kubiak. But what do you plan to do in the second act? Have me arrested?"

"Yes," Kubiak told him.

Kubiak had been dragged over to District 19 along with Morris. He didn't arrive home until after midnight. Denise was waiting for him.

"You have to hand it to Crawford," he said, finally pouring that beer for himself at the bar by the front window. "He had Morris broken down in under five hours, even got him to give up where he stashed the gun."

"Well," Denise told him, "you always say, once you get a man's friends or family to turn on him . . . You zeroed in on Morris awfully fast yourself. What made you suspect him over the others?"

"That gun. When I asked him about it at the coffee shop, he claimed not to know whether it was a revolver or a semiautomatic, yet it had to be carefully loaded with blanks, and he had just fired it last Christmas at Volti on a nightly basis, which he also conveniently forgot. A little too much deliberate ignorance on his part to keep me from guessing he might have just used it on Rydell only hours earlier."

"That's nice."

"Nice? I don't know what's nice about it. What is it, what's the matter?"

"I'm just a little disappointed in your methods this time."

"You mean that whole business of getting Watts implicated to take the heat off Barbara?"

"No, I'm talking about the business of claiming to have sprung Watts and having him there in the theater, calling out at him to turn on the lights. You've always done a fine job of obfuscating, but I've never known you to outright lie."

"But I didn't. I only said I made arrangements for Watts's release, not that I managed it. You remember this morning at breakfast when Barbara asked us if we knew a good lawyer, and I phoned ours on her behalf? What would you call that? And I never did refer to Purcell as Watts. You only thought I did. The magic of theater."

"How did you talk Purcell into that anyway? And why him? I could have taken the part just as easily."

"Of course you could have," Kubiak told her. "And you're always first on my mind. But I didn't want to tear you away from little Bobo's side, and there was some danger involved. If Morris had bolted for the lobby door, the only thing between it and him was Purcell. I even warned Purcell about it, but he didn't seem to care. He took quite a liking to Barbara during her passages through the lobby. I'm sure that when she rides the wave of publicity over this to center stage in the Loop's theater district, he'll be her biggest fan, with complimentary tickets in his back pocket to Saturday night seats in the orchestra pit. I only hope he can keep his mouth shut about it downstairs. The last thing we need are any more late night visitors demanding rum and favors. All this talk, talk, talk. It seldom comes to any good. ♣

THE GINKGO LEAF

ANN WOODWARD

After clouds and wind and finally driving rain, the first cold had come, heavy and still in the night. Though it was already the Tenth Month, there had been balmy weeks, and the edge of winter was not yet expected. One sleepy bird piped a weak complaint at long intervals; the last leaves fell one by one to rattle gently against those on the ground. Inside the house, bare floorboards were chill as ice except near the firebox. The old woman drew off the koto cover, a piece of brocade so old it raveled if touched too harshly. Almost apologizing to it for moving it from its customary place near the outer doors, she carried the koto to the girl, who sat on a cushion holding her hands to the charcoal pulsing with fire. There was a faint chime of strings as the instrument was set down. The girl instantly began tuning, adjusting the bridges, plucking out a minor mode. Soon she began to play, simply the melody of a folk song. *Danger to itself, the plum tree blossoms too soon.*

He left his horse and his guards at some distance down the alley and walked alone to her house. The guards knew every aspect of his visits here, they saw his seriousness and made no remarks. Moving away from the bloody events of the day, he felt his nature overcome the split that life required of him. As her music became clearer, he allowed cleansing breath into his chest, he felt that he became a being of air and not of blood, blood too easily released to stain the earth, to mar the least event, in these days of fighting. Others might think of him as a man of strife, but he saw himself as the one who had found this remarkable girl who was a victim, a girl whose music, so wistful, so tender, expressed to him the essence of his struggle to live as he felt a man should.

Arriving, he found the place in the wall where he had stepped through many times before. Yes, the black door was unlocked; yes, the lamp was there in a pool of light; yes, he slid open the final door, after crossing two halls of looming emptiness; yes, too bad, she still hid behind her curtain frame, a wall of hanging silk wafted inward by the drafts of his coming. As usual, the old woman had been banished. As usual, she played on, though he knew she had heard

him come. Not as usual, he lifted away the stand with its billowing silk. She faltered and stopped playing.

"What—"

"We do not need this. It is time for us to sit in firelight with uncovered faces." He regarded her with frank kindness, and she was as he had thought she would be, rather plain but pale, her features flat and unadorned with powder, rouge, or lip color. Her expression was grave and frightened, but he thought that when she smiled, there would not be the stylish vacancy caused by the fashion of blackened teeth and that it would be a smile of welcome.

Flipping the plectrums from her fingers, she turned her face away and fussed with her robes, adjusting the collars, spreading the sleeves, reaching into an inner belt for her fan. But he took it from her and placed it behind him. "Uncovered," he said.

She hid her mouth with the tips of fingers stretching out under a sleeve. She could not tell if she would laugh or if tears would come. Dipping her head, she let her hair fall low. Behind her, the stream of her hair, uncut since she was born, lay across the folds of her top robe, vivid black on gold, longer than she was tall.

"Now breathe," he said. "I am not so frightening, am I?"

Oh, no, he is not, she thought, though it was a northern face such as she had never seen, dark and deeply carved. But she could not untangle the tight cords in her throat and words did not come.

"Now play some more."

She played, using the words that everyone knew as old songs. *How like ice my heart, when I wait and wait and wait, and you do not come . . . Greenwater River flows deep, heavy and silent. So is my heart deep. One must respect strength like that, for it can sweep all away . . . Do not leave me here, Oh do not leave me here where all can see my tears. For they will whisper of you, Where is he? They will wonder.* Then she stopped and found her own words.

She told him of her childhood in this house, of running in the garden when she was very small, splashing stones into the pond, calling loudly and frantically to the gardener's daughter when she hid. She told of the end of all this childish boisterousness when she became older, of her hatred of calligraphy lessons and poetry drill, of plans for dressing her in layers and layers of matched colors of silk, of reciting quotations to her mother, who knew perfectly well that her daughter remembered by now every poem in every book and scroll in the house, for this was one part of her training she had taken to; hatred especially of being secluded from sight and kept indoors, but hating nothing so much as talk of possible husbands to be discreetly allowed access behind her curtain and even, after proper exchanges of enthusiastic poems, to her bed.

"You were frightened," he said.

"No, I just hated."

"It is what is done, to trade our women for family advancement, and often we don't ask your permission. You knew it all your life, but you never thought of it as something to do with you."

"It was hateful. I was hateful. I tried to make myself unsuitable."

"You needn't tell me about it."

"No. I won't. But you must understand . . ."

"Ah, yes, I do. And I am here, knowing—"

"You know these terrible things already?"

"I was about to say I know your heart. Because when you play that music, I listen. I am very good at listening."

On that same night, the woman who was known as the Lady Aoi lay in another house not too far away. She said to the man beside her, "When you are gone—"

"I was not gone, I was away."

"When you are gone, my spirit sinks and practices grieving."

He lay without moving, breathing into the frigid night, as present as he could make himself. She did not mean all this, he knew her strength. She was tired and upset by the trouble in the streets.

"Perhaps it was just that I was here in your house, where you are usually . . ." She let the sentence die, as not worth finishing, she gave up complaining, recognizing that she had succumbed to an impulse to seek comfort. Yet one finger moved under the silk-wadded cover until it touched the outer robe of the Great Minister of the Right, father of the princess she served and her own special friend.

The house of the princess had been damaged by robbers, who were made bolder by pervasive confusion caused by continuing trouble with the militant monks. Under cover of raids and processions and hectoring protests, intruders were scaling walls and forcing gates at all hours. Many residents had left the capital for outlying peaceful temples or country estates. The husband of Aoi's princess had come noisily with a parade of carriages and taken off the whole household. All except Aoi, who was required here, he said. But when she arrived, the house had been left in charge of the minister's steward, besides whom there were only servants and the guards.

"Ah, lady!" the steward had said, greeting her. "There is an urgent conference at the palace, and he must stay there. And then he thinks he will have to go east and bring back soldiers. He knew it would comfort me if you were here to consult."

As with all the minister's people, he was competent and modest

and had no need to flaunt authority. So she was welcomed and established in her own space, along with O-hana, her maid, and they all worked together to plan how best to protect the house: armed guards making a proper show, tradesmen eased in and out of half-opened doors, fire baskets burning in the grounds at night. Now the minister had managed to break away from the panic around the emperor, but only for a short time, and then he would mount his horse.

"Listen," he said out of the darkness. "There is a certain situation. It involves the Young Nun and you must go there."

"Oh no," Aoi said.

The woman who was still called the Young Nun had not actually taken any vows. At least, that is what was believed. It was a vague story of some outrageous behavior when she was just at marriageable age, almost fourteen, and her family was scouting for suitable young men. Some said she had attacked her mother; some said she had merely screamed and cried, but so shamefully that the parents considered her mad; some said she had cut herself and scattered blood all over the house. Whatever it was she did, her reputation for instability spread, and she was taken away somewhere. And then the parents died, of grief and distress, it was said, of embarrassment, of helpless rage. There were two funerals, the empty house sat for a year, and she came back to it, found some of the old servants, and lived on what an uncle sent monthly, never, it was said, practicing religion. The garden fence was rotting, weeds grew on the paths. She played the koto very well, it could be heard in the late evenings, and so people knew that she was there. Yet no one breached that crumbling fence, and the Young Nun lived undisturbed by suitors.

"Why must I go?" Aoi said to the minister.

"It is only a feeling I have about the Other Minister."

Traditionally the Minister of the Right was subordinate to the other top minister, he of the Left. But the present Minister of the Left was a useless fop who gloried in official duties and the fine clothing and exquisite ceremony required for such display. He had no stomach for actual governing and left all such unpleasant duties to his counterpart. And so it was with tact, shrewdness, circumspection, and care that the lesser minister ruled the country of Japan, the emperor having no practical power.

"The Other Minister is afflicted with an honest man. That man has developed an attachment to the Young Nun. And I am worried."

Aoi sighed.

But with only such scant information, she went in the morning

with O-hana, riding in a modest carriage that creaked and squealed in the cold. O-hana had packed a few simple robes, the warmest ones, and she had wrapped and tied Aoi's chest of medicines with all the tiny drawers and packages and lacquer boxes, holding it in her lap as she did whenever they traveled. It was early morning. The minister had left before dawn because business at the palace started in the dark. The streets were almost empty, only carpenters and tofu sellers about, a few men with charcoal in baskets hung from poles.

Arriving, Aoi had to brace herself to go in. These old houses, they breathed such odors. Two women bowed and scuttled before them, one very old, one almost a child. She would be available after the morning meal, they said. She was never up this early.

The odors were there, as odors are in a strange house, but were not unpleasant. And glancing sideways as they hurried through cold gloom, Aoi saw no dilapidation, though a great deal of bareness. Which could be interpreted as serenity, she thought. Simplicity, she thought, is not a bad thing. Nor is selling off the furniture when you are poor. Nor is trying to think positively about an unwelcome situation.

In mid morning, they were summoned. But they were not to *see* the Young Nun just yet, it seemed. She received them from behind a curtain of patterned brocade, the first rich item Aoi had seen in the house.

"Can you tell me why you are here?" said the hidden woman.

Aoi was struck dumb. Hadn't she been asked for? Hadn't someone explained that a palace-wise woman was needed here, for propriety? For protection? For— Not sure herself what she could do, or was expected to do, Aoi took a leap. "I understand that he is a warrior."

Such a cutting through of all the usual careful sentences expected in any situation between strangers seemed to take away the breath of the woman behind the curtain screen. There had been anger, resistance, hostility, and incipient rudeness in her one question. But Aoi knew—for she *was* a palace-wise woman—how to deflate these windy poses.

"They are not as other men you may have—" Here she paused. This girl? Woman? How old were those stories? Would she have ever known any man except her father? "—other men you may have heard of or read of. I have always found them more direct, more—"

"I am afraid of him," came in a small voice from behind the folds of red and sounds of weeping.

Aoi turned a little toward O-hana, who sat with the household's old woman beside the door. She commonly consulted with her sensible maid, who now looked back with no expression except a slight stirring of one eyebrow. The old woman made no gesture of help toward the red curtain. Aoi raised an open fan to cover her face, an impulse to remove herself from a situation she did not understand.

This girl, she thought—she must be still a girl—has been watched, corrected, supervised, picked apart her entire life, until she rebelled in some extreme way. She will not hear any advice, she will not let anyone teach her. So. Let her teach herself.

"Tell me what he is like."

"He doesn't talk."

"I see. And that is what frightens you."

"No. He listens. He likes my music."

Aoi felt more and more adrift. She could assume some parts of the story: He passes by her house late and hears the Young Nun playing; the music moves him; he stops to listen, goes closer, comes another time, makes himself known, sends in a poem or two, is admitted by the old woman after many entreaties. Typical. But then?

"He threatens you, menaces?"

"No, no. He is attentive. We speak, he listens."

"But you are frightened."

"I am afraid he won't come back. It is not every evening because he has duties."

"Ah." It was all Aoi could manage.

"One night I will go with him, when he leaves."

"He mentions such an idea? He has plans?"

"This is not a house for living in. It is a house to be dead in. I will go with him, to some other place. I will not stay here." There was steel in her voice. So she was the one with plans.

Aoi thought of the many questions a responsible parent would ask, but she knew that anything implying doubt of the girl's judgment would be a mistake.

"I should like to know this man so sensitive to music, this strong person who does not talk. It is indeed my experience that attentive silence is a positive trait in man or woman."

"Oh thank you!" And the girl, unnerved by approval, wept again.

"Tell me his name," Aoi said

It was the old woman who answered, her voice heavy with the bitterness of having been the one to admit him. "He is called—"

"Don't say it!" cried the Young Nun. "It would be bad luck."



Aoi and O-hana busied themselves with unpacking. The house was a large one and they explored empty spaces, all bare and chill. O-hana went to offer help in the kitchen and found there an old man thrashing about with violent whacks of a knife at cabbage and leeks, poking at a fire, fanning away smoke. He was unwelcoming.

"Will the warrior come tonight?" Aoi said to O-hana when she returned.

"They don't know," she said. "It is always late and they are asleep."

"We will have to keep watch."

It had been a long and trying day, and Aoi gave in to sleep, trusting O-hana to waken her when she, too, felt overwhelmed. She could not tell how long she had been unknowing when a series of vibrating tones on the koto brought her back into consciousness. The girl was sounding a simple melody, the old folk song that begins "Off on that far hill," dropping elegant little embellishments between phrases, the mode of tuning a minor one. She played without display of unusual skill, but with a depth of sadness that touched Aoi. And a man of strength had responded with a protective instinct, she thought. This is a man worth knowing.

That night and the next there were commotions outside. The light of fires colored the sky, shouts came from the next road, men ran with heavy steps and jarring breath down the alley behind the house. O-hana checked that raindoors were secure, that intruders did not roam within the grounds. In one back corner of the veranda was a small solid door painted black. Both Aoi and O-hana found it unlatched, locked it, and were puzzled to find it opened again. This happened often enough that they mentioned it to each other, but did not bother to question the old woman. Mostly they listened, and both nights, very late, the girl played. But they saw no visitor.

By daylight, the city quieter, they slept. Thus two days passed and they still had not seen the Young Nun. On the third night they both gave in to exhaustion. Light rain dripped from the eaves, it was a little warmer. In the morning there were cries and wails, not from outside but from within the house. When they saw at last the actual form of the Young Nun, it was as a dead body.

The old woman had run shouting for them to come, but when they arrived, grasping their night robes about them, in the small screened-off space where the Young Nun lived, the woman had fled, and the crumpled figure of the girl lay among twists of a blue

robe, thrown backward from where she had been kneeling at her writing desk. A livid streak of bruise marked her throat and Aoi knew, from the horrifying angle of her head, that a severe blow had broken her neck. The desk had collapsed, ink and paper littered the floor.

Undisturbed by any person of the house—the young serving girl crouched by a sliding door ready to flee if noticed but avid to see what had happened—Aoi sat to consider the scene. She looked around, suppressing her sorrow, rising above shock and anger. This was a place they had not been invited to, the true home of the Young Nun, furnished with a few simple chests and folding screens that were beautifully decorated. These were the finest things from a formerly rich house, the few that had not been sold. On the veranda side of the space, a long koto instrument lay under its cover of brocade.

Just in front of the shattered desk was a smear of mud and gravel, in its center, a single yellow ginkgo leaf. She signaled to O-hana to pick it up.

"Let us see," she said, "what happened here. I don't think that it was robbers. Such a house as this would not attract them. That door, the small black one at the corner of the veranda, was traditionally left open for the man who visited, we can assume that, since we found it unlatched so many times."

O-hana nodded.

"He came in wearing shoes. A man intent on murder does not bother about clean floors. The leaf on his foot made him slip, just as he moved to strike. He fell onto the desk, but still he— Hmm. That is a warrior's blow, perhaps the back of a sword or the flat of it. It did not cut, but hit with such force . . ."

She looked at O-hana, who said, "He *would* not use the edge? Or did it turn because he fell?"

"That depends," Aoi said, "on who he was."

O-hana stepped carefully into the wreckage and held up the inkstone for Aoi to see. They examined it. The girl had ground quite a lot of ink, and the little trough for mixing it with water must have been full, to have spilled so much when it was upset by the man's fall. The front of her robe was black with it. And clear on the grinding surface were the prints of fingers.

"Check her hands," Aoi said to O-hana.

"Clean. It's all on her clothes and on the floor just there."

Aoi sat for a long time. The Young Nun *had* been young, of slight figure. The face was slack in death, but Aoi could see the strength in it, the mouth firm in outline, the brow high above natural eyebrows, which she had scorned to pluck as she had scorned

any makeup. Her hair, that most prized of female attractions, was exceptionally long and full, surely her one good feature. It had not been cut, not even shortened at the sides in token of full cutting for religious vows, as was so fashionable to do for those less than serious about leaving the world. And she had not tied it with ribbons for sleeping, so she had expected him. But then, she had probably always expected him.

Holding the ginkgo leaf, observing the inkstone, Aoi considered what to do. Whatever it was, it must be done quickly.

"What was she writing?" she said to O-hana.

They found several sheets of paper with abandoned lines of poetry. All used images of a crane, an awkward bird, long lived, beautiful in flight, of raucous voice, solitary, but much admired, much spied upon, never a pet.

Still Aoi sat thinking. The minister is not here, but he put me in his house to give me vicarious authority. He suspected trouble from the Other Minister. Because of an honest man. Aoi understood fully the kind of trouble an honest man would cause. Someone who saw that peasants were not taxed beyond legal limits, someone who respected boundaries, gave true lists of stores and accounts of harvest to inspectors, would not approve hidden rice granaries, paid his men—for this man was a warrior and probably head of his troop—their full wages and kept nothing back for himself. He had come into the city to protect the property of the Other Minister. Or he had been brought with his men to control the priests, to fight . . . To Aoi, this seemed more likely. A troublesome honest man. Put him to fighting armed priests, and he may be killed and we are rid of him, the Other Minister would have thought.

But . . .

He becomes attached to a strange girl, one no person in the capital would encourage him to know. This would be good news to an enemy, grist for criticism and unflattering rumor. But why kill her?

Suddenly Aoi realized that she was not blaming the warrior suitor, but the master who did not want an honest man in his service. She was intuiting a whole situation that could be entirely false: That the warrior friend of the Young Nun was the honest man. That he was head of armed men, put daily in danger. That there had been efforts to control his thwarting respect for the law. And finally, that the killing of this girl was to take away someone he valued, and to prove that they could do it, to convince him of their intent to master him, and to frighten him.

Well, she thought, I have only intuition, but if we are to act, it

must be at once. To O-hana she said, "Go back to the house and bring the steward."

He came, but not alone. Other men would deal with the body, taking upon themselves the uncleanness of death. They would close the house and send the young serving girl back to her grandparents. The steward himself went to see the steward of the Other Minister, who, unable to counter the strength of influence from this direction, had his master's armed men assembled in the courtyard. Aoi arrived in an elaborate carriage the steward had sent for her, which was so obviously from the Great Minister of the Right that the men suppressed their muttering. They had heard something, and they had no patience for dealing with a useless woman. The something had been a bad thing for their captain and they wanted action. But this lady, concealed so properly within ornamented lacquer and layers of curtains, must not be offended. The two stewards faced them down and they subsided.

Aoi saw that the mustering was being managed by a man who was not tall but thick in his limbs and who looked strong rather than quick. Ah, she thought, here is the quiet warrior. The steward she knew brought him to the back curtain, which Aoi moved aside just enough to see his face and to let him see her eyes over an opened fan. She gazed at him, the look of a woman who was used to reading the faces of palace people who did not like to be read. His eyes met the search with steady regard. She could find no deception in them, but there was pain and tension there. So he knew. Facing her with set features, he said merely, "All present."

"You are sure that none are missing?"

"Yes."

"You understand what we are to do?" she said in a low voice, so that the steward of the Other Minister could not hear. She handed him the ginkgo leaf, seeing him hold it with one hand and feel the edge with the other. This was to make sure of his innocence, and she told him enough about the death that he would know her purpose. His seriousness deepened, his eyes searched for and found honest sympathy.

"Have them draw their swords," she said.

"Lady, all our swords have been cleaned, though we fight every day. We will not find blood on them. Or if we do . . ."

"I see. Nevertheless . . ." She told him what to look for, and he began inspection of his men.

Arranged in lines, they stood with expressionless faces, each one holding a sword against his shoulder. Aoi watched. So many bare weapons made her shudder. She thought of the Young Nun, killed

by one of these swords but without blood, as if a sword could be subtle in killing, disdainful of the red that might mark its user. Concentrating, she reminded herself that they were not looking for blood, but a stain much harder to wash away.

The men were armored and rank with smells of horse and effort, their faces now not quite blank but tinged with disrespect. The steward of the Other Minister suddenly struck one of them across the cheek. He was not sure what his counterpart meant to do, and it made him angry. The soldier dropped his challenging eyes. To each man was offered the ginkgo leaf, a pure golden yellow fan, a little limp but still standing erect on its stem. Each man took it in his left hand as the soldiers' captain said, "Have you seen this leaf?" Each made a show of examining it.

They were puzzled, they shook their heads. The captain proceeded from man to man, conscious that the question was inane, but so clear in his authority that they could not challenge him.

When they reached the man who had not been able to scrub all the ink from his left hand, the captain threw him to the ground and called for others to bind him. But their swords were ready and he was dead before anyone could stop them. For the men knew their captain, his worth, and his unfortunate passion for a girl in a decaying house. With this second death, they were choosing.

When the Great Minister of the Right returned with a large army of men from his own estates in the east and from those of his friends, the monks were quickly subdued, driven back to their half-burned quarters on the mountain. He promised them justice, both for their complaints and for their crimes, and then it was over and he went to his house. He came to Aoi late in the day. He was loud and cheerful, dirty, exhausted, still pacing with high energy, hot in the house, dropping clothes as he went, shouting for the bath, which was already heated, and finally able to sit, sad but content that she was there.

"I have heard," he said, "what happened. It is a shameful thing, but the Other Minister claims to have had no knowledge of what one of his soldiers did. Everyone knows, he says, that they can't be controlled. And he pretends to be bitter that I have taken his captain and that now he does not trust his men, so they may as well come to us too. He has achieved his aim, the man is gone, and I have acquired an honest overseer and a new troop of soldiers to help him."

Pausing, he examined Aoi's calm. "Have you suffered from all this?" he asked. "You see that you did very well without me."

"No," she said, "I am not ever very well without you. But I seem

to be able to find some abilities of my own. And you have a very good steward."

"Hmm."

"But she said a strange thing that I cannot forget. She said that was a house to be dead in."

"Ah."

"She spoke truly. No one had been kind to her. Until he came."

"Don't be sad," he said. "You have served her well."

"But," Aoi said, "what I did was only a bit of trickery. I should have saved her."

"You do so much, and yet . . . This dilemma is not new to anyone human."

"No. But you are falling asleep. Let me call the maid to lay out the beds." 🦉

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GOLDEN YEARS

JANICE LAW

Carol and I were sitting around the condo pool with sunscreen on our noses and glasses of iced tea in our hands when we saw the Hirsch woman going out to her car. Her full name was Vi Hirsch, but because of an incident in our fifth floor laundry room, Carol always referred to her as the Hirsch woman.

"She's got him with her again," Carol said.

I craned my neck to see over the decorative iron fence and the hibiscus hedge with the big orange blossoms that looked fake but weren't. Vi, smart in a saffron pantsuit, was helping an old gent ease into her new white BMW.

"The bad thing about this place is there're no suitable men." Carol, like me, is a widow of long standing.

"I don't know about that." The professional football player who lived on the tenth floor had just stepped out in all his mahogany magnificence.

"Be real," said Carol. "He needs a couple centuries of seasoning."

"At least! Still—" The sad truth was that around the condo, men came in their twenties and thirties, or else with oxygen tanks. It frightened me sometimes that I was beginning to warm up to tubing and walkers.

"And then you see the Hirsch woman. She's been driving old geezers around ever since she moved in here. With two, she could at least share the wealth."

"Two? Was there *another* man in the car?"

"Not now," said Carol. "We met him in the lobby, remember? Must have been six months ago. More, maybe."

I had a hazy memory of returning from the beach—sandals, damp cover-up, baseball cap, your basic geezer glamour attire, and seeing a strange man sitting in the lobby. The strange man was in the desirable age range but did not look too chipper. He looked so pale, in fact, that Carol stopped to ask if he needed anything.

The old fellow had a gallant manner, topped off with the faintest of accents, but I couldn't help noticing a pervasive smell of alcohol.

He explained that he was waiting for Mrs. Hirsch and had come in because of the heat. He was wearing a dark and heavy-looking suit.

"Lobby's free," said Carol.

We talked to Hubert Reinschler for a few minutes and discovered that Mrs. Hirsch had been very kind to him in his recent illness. He went on about this until the elevator door opened and herself swept out to pounce on the poor man. I should say Vi was older than we were but expensively preserved and extremely careful with herself. I don't think Vi Hirsch saw more sun than a mole, and she always went out with straw hats and long sleeves and tinted glasses big as headlights.

She plumped down on the lobby sofa without giving us a glance and began serious fussing: the heat, Hubert's trip to the condo—which might have been from Istanbul the way she went on—her concerns about whatever business they had together.

We'd had to admit that Vi Hirsch seemed genuinely concerned. Remembering the scene now, I said, "I suppose there's some good in everyone."

Carol snorted. "People who hog the laundry room and take your clothes out before they're finished will do worse."

There was something to that. Besides, the aqua condo pool with its chlorine perfume and view of the waterway is the perfect place to dissect one's neighbors, and we amused ourselves hashing over Vi Hirsch and her friend. But our interest in the pair remained just something to pass the time between a swim and a cocktail until the day we saw both Vi and Wilma dressed to the nines in black. Vi sported a lace mantilla more appropriate for a bullfight than anywhere I could imagine in South Florida, and Wilma had a picture hat with ebony flowers. On the strength of our shared interest in quilting, I asked if they were off to a funeral.

Vi didn't answer, but Wilma said, "Yes, our friend. Poor Hubert. It was terrible. We had to identify him."

Carol and I were ready for the details, but Vi grabbed Wilma's elbow. "We're late already."

"How about that," said Carol when the women departed in their black widow outfits. "We were just talking about him recently. He's the man we met in the lobby. Wasn't his name Hubert?"

I thought it was. Even Wilma and Hirsch didn't have an unlimited supply of gentleman callers.

"Wonder what happened," Carol said.

"Could have been anything by the look of him, lungs, heart, liver, kidneys. He smelled like a still too, poor man."

Carol thought this over. We were sitting on the beach after our

swim when she said, "I don't think he can have died in the hospital, not if they had to identify him. Didn't Wilma say that?"

Yes, she had. "Odd," I said. "I suppose there will be a death notice."

We went back and checked the morning paper. Then we looked at several back issues on the Web. No Hubert Reinschler in the death notices. As we were idly scrolling around, I stopped her. "Wait a minute. Wait, what's that?"

"The hit and run—well, they think it was a hit and run. You remember. It happened near the sleazy motel."

"I want to read that."

Carol brought up the story. An unknown man, probably in his seventies, was found dead in an alley one morning. We had noticed the story originally because pedestrian accidents have a certain resonance with dedicated walkers, but we had not bothered to follow it up. Now we did. Three days later a little brief mentioned that the hit-and-run casualty had been identified as one Hubert Reinschler, 76, whose last address was a motel on Federal Highway.

"That's too bad," I said. "He seemed nice."

"Probably drunk," Carol said. "You were right about the smell of alcohol."

"Maybe he had his reasons."

We felt subdued for the rest of the day, and we were rather irritated when we heard Wilma and Vi returning in what we both thought was an inappropriately cheerful mood. As I say, our pool-side chats promote a certain cynicism, and realizing that, I stopped Wilma several days later in the hallway and said I was sorry to hear about Mr. Reinschler. "I hope it was a nice service."

"We did everything we should have," she replied and walked straight to the elevator.

"She was very odd," I told Carol, "even if she is a demon quilter. And, you know, it sounded as if they'd arranged the service."

"The pair of them are beyond me. Men have perverse tastes. Look at the latest one."

"There's another one?"

"You saw him. The thin gent. Very feeble. We saw him the other day getting into the car."

"Oh, that's right." I had a clear image of a stooped and bony man struggling with the door of Hirsch's car.

"And they're very close."

"Really?"

"When I was waiting for the postman to finish putting in the mail the other day, I noticed a letter with a man's name in care of the Hirsch woman."

"Scandal."

"Well, I was hopeful, but it was from MetLife."

"Could that be an insurance policy?"

"Could be anything, I guess, but why use this address? I wrote his name down. Only way to go these days." She reached into her pocket for what she calls Senilityguard—the little notebook she uses for shopping. "Peter R. Musgrove."

"He could be a relative. He could be anyone—we don't know if he's the man we saw."

We were curious enough to open the phone book. Thanks to Bell South, we located a Peter Musgrove who lived on the west side in a semishabby neighborhood of older homes and small apartment houses. His address was on the right side of Dixie Highway, but just barely.

"Do you suppose he is the man we saw? He might be young, he might be someone else entirely."

"We can check," said Carol.

"Why would we do that?" I asked, but I knew why. Just recently Vi Hirsch had traded in an elderly Pontiac, very nice but with some dings and paint scratches and the beginnings of seaside rust, for that cream BMW, and the condo manager had given me to understand that Wilma was having her unit redecorated and her balcony marble tiled. These were the two widows on fixed incomes who were always howling about expenses at condo meetings. Assessments even for essential repairs to the roof and the drainage system had been almost enough to drive them out of their homes. Almost.

"Well," I said. "It wouldn't hurt to go by his apartment."

That's what we did. It was a blocky, faded-pink building with ancient air conditioners and rusting ironwork, unattractive except for the enormous banyan tree that shaded the premises from the next lot.

"Park for a minute," Carol said. We found the lobby open and she pushed Musgrove's bell.

"What are you going to say?"

She was connected before she could answer. "Hello. Mr. Musgrove?"

He buzzed us right in. "He's not very careful."

Musgrove was in a back apartment, and he was waiting with the door half open: a short, square old man with white hair and thick glasses. He was clearly surprised when we came within his focal range, and I figured he'd confused Carol's voice with Vi's. Otherwise, he looked spry and upright.

We'd clearly gotten the wrong guy; I was casting about for some

sort of excuse, when Carol said, "So sorry to bother you, but we've been looking for an apartment for my nephew." Carol can be incredibly glib when she gets going. Far as I know she has no nephew and certainly not one studying business at Florida Atlantic.

Mr. Musgrove said there was considerable turnover but nothing at the moment. Which was too bad because the apartments were kept very nice. "Neighborhood's a bit noisy, but a young fellow wouldn't mind that."

We agreed youth was rarely troubled by noise, and the apartment looked decent. So did Mr. Musgrove, who seemed without too many health issues or bad habits. He might be a pleasant dinner companion, a date for the movies, a man one could get fond of. As we were leaving, I said, "I forget how we heard about the apartment. Was it Vi Hirsch, Carol?"

She said it was, and he said, "I know Mrs. Hirsch. She's been very kind."

This was worse than I'd thought. One old man was charity, two or three made me nervous. Still, when we compared notes back in the car I suggested Musgrove was not a man to put himself in harm's way.

"He opened the door without knowing who I was."

"He thought you were Vi Hirsch."

"Perish the thought."

"I'm guessing she visits pretty often."

"Why?"

"A beautiful head of hair and functioning brain cells?"

"Maybe. But is that enough to pay his insurance?"

"No," I said immediately. "Not if that's what she's doing."

"I hope *he* doesn't go walking at night," said Carol.

"You don't really think—"

"I sort of think," said Carol, "and so do you."

We had rather a somber ride home. It's one thing to dislike one of your neighbors—and in a condo as big as our complex you're bound to dislike a few. It's quite another matter to associate them with fatal accidents or worse. That night we sat in my living room and hashed over our options. We hadn't a shred of proof that Vi and Wilma—Wilma of the tiny, perfect quilting stitches!—were anything other than good Samaritans, except for their coming into money right after the death of a near derelict.

"Mr. Musgrove isn't rich either."

"More valuable dead," said Carol and stopped herself, appalled.

I nodded. "Assuming he's insured."

"Assuming. We need to warn him. But first we need to get to know him. How do we do that?"

"Grocery shopping? Everybody has to do shopping. He probably walks. Didn't he say he had to give up his car?"

We got out our big area map and found Ideal Market. It was across the highway, which was bad, but within six blocks of Musgrove's apartment, which was good.

"What time of day do we go?" Carol asked.

"Morning, I think, but not rush hour. Not super early but before it gets too hot. You realize we have no idea of what day he goes or how often. It could be ages."

"Would you rather just confront the Hirsch woman?" Carol knows full well that I hate conflict. She rather enjoys a scrap, not me.

It took us nearly a week, and we were getting tired of lurking about the aisles and buying things we didn't particularly need, before we spotted Peter Musgrove with a cloth shopping bag over his arm and a cane in one hand. We parked and hustled in after him. I picked up the *Tampa Tribune*, Carol got a bottle of dish liquid, and we wound up behind him in the check-out line.

"You're Peter Musgrove, aren't you?"

He turned slowly. In the bright store light, it was easy to see that his eyes were clouded. "We came looking for information about an apartment one day."

He remembered. We chatted about nothing and walked out together. Carol remarked on the heat and when Musgrove agreed, it was dreadful offered him a ride. Simple as that. Soon we were on such good terms that we were taking him with us to the big Publix, where the selection is better and the prices are too.

Within two weeks, we knew a fair bit more, and what we learned didn't set our minds at ease. Vi Hirsch had been very kind to him, very. He'd met her at his church right after his wife died. It had been a long, ruinous illness, and Vi had actually paid the deposit on his present apartment when he'd come up short of cash. "She's not always the easiest woman," he admitted, but she was helpful. "I don't see to do paperwork so good anymore." Carol and I exchanged a glance.

Peter said that he went to the beach when he had a companion: "I'm afraid I might float out to sea otherwise," he joked—and he went to the Wednesday night and Sunday morning services at the big new Baptist church that was within walking distance of his apartment.

Bad possibilities in several directions, Carol observed later, but once we got back to the condo, our fears seemed exaggerated. For all we knew, Vi Hirsch might have been trying to sort out some claims for Peter. At least, we tried to tell ourselves that. Then one day I was in the lobby when Wilma came in. She is always much

more friendly and pleasant when she is alone than when she's with company. This time, she complimented me on my dress.

"All I need is someone to squire me around," I joked. "Maybe Vi would loan me one of the nice old guys I've seen in her car."

Wilma turned quite white.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

She denied it, blaming the heat, but Carol agreed later it was a peculiar reaction. We began to read through the papers with great care, and we weren't reassured when we found a brief about an elderly man who'd died of gas inhalation. He'd lived alone and there was no known next of kin.

"It could be coincidence," I said. "There are lots of people living alone."

"We could find out who claimed the body," she suggested.

"I'm not sure the police will release that. But his church is mentioned." I could feel myself getting pale.

"Let me guess," said Carol, seeing my expression. "That big new Baptist outfit."

"Fraid so."

She went right to the phone. I wouldn't have had the nerve, I don't think, but she called the pastor. Ten minutes later, after expressing her regrets about Mr. Leyland and promising to mail a donation for his service, she put down the phone. "Mrs. Hirsch and Mrs. Roseland have taken care of everything."

"Was it an accident? If it's an accident, they're salt of the earth."

"And if not, they're Agent Orange—even if she is a good quilter."

The next day we picked up Peter for our usual shopping trip. I managed to steer the conversation to his church and asked him if he had gone there for long.

He said that his wife had been a regular at the Baptist's former, smaller church. This one had only been open for about three years. His face was shadowed at the thought. "It's been just over two years since Margaret died." He shook his head. "That's when I met Vi Hirsch," he said. "Just after."

I took a deep breath. Life insurance policies pay up in full after two years of premiums. With a glance at Carol, I said, "Can I ask you a nosy question—believe me, I have good reason."

When he nodded, I asked, "Do you carry life insurance?"

"I used to," he said, "when my Margaret was alive. I always expected to go first, you see."

"The reason I asked is something Carol noticed."

She explained about the envelope she'd seen.

"I don't know how that can be," Peter said. "There must be some mistake."

"Would you be willing to check? To call MetLife? We have a reason."

"Maybe you better tell me what that is."

When we finished, Peter looked serious. Back at his apartment, we found a local agent, and Peter got on the phone. It took fifteen minutes before he covered the receiver and said, "I'm insured for a half million dollars."

"Cancel it right away," said Carol. "And be sure that Hirsch woman knows about it!"

He did the paperwork the next day. The agent brought a copy of the policy—Peter had signed it all right. "With the paperwork for Margaret, I'm sure. I don't see so well," he told the agent.

"We should take this to the police," I said, but Peter was doubtful. Vi and Wilma had been very kind in other ways. And there was no proof.

"You might know if you tell her," Carol said.

So Friday we invited Peter over to the condo. That was the day Vi and Wilma always had lunch at Crabby Pete's. We were sitting poolside when the BMW pulled in.

"She used to drive that old Pontiac," said Peter.

I stood up and went to the fence. "Wilma, Vi, come over for a minute. Look who's here."

I opened the gate for them and they stepped onto the pool deck in their dress shoes. Even with her eyes shadowed by her usual big hat—fuchsia with cream trim today—I could see Vi wasn't pleased.

"We're celebrating," I said. "Peter's come into a little windfall."

That caught their attention. Peter looked dour and uncomfortable.

"I just discovered that someone insured me for a good deal of money," he said.

"No one can insure you against your will," Vi said quickly.

"You've just forgotten you filled out the paperwork."

"My memory is fine, but my eyes aren't what they used to be," Peter said. "We signed a lot of documents after Margaret passed away."

"We! We?"

"You were paying the premiums, so I suppose I should thank you," Peter said. "The cancellation was quite profitable."

"What have you done?" Vi got up out of her chair. "This is your doing," she said to Carol. "This is your fault."

She made a lunge for Carol, and Peter gallantly stuck out his cane. Vi tripped, caught her knee on the curbing around the pool, and tumbled in with a great splash. Oh, it was a scene for sure, with suits threatened and language above and beyond anything

we've heard at the condo for quite some time. Vi went so far as to sic a lawyer on Peter, but she soon had other uses for her legal backup. The nice MetLife man discovered an insurance fraud investigation was already underway in another case, and pretty soon the police reopened both the death of Hubert Reinschler and the old gent who'd died of gas inhalation.

"No doubt at all," an officer told us, "Mr. Musgrove was next on the list."

Peter was of the same opinion. He treated Carol and me to a very handsome dinner out of the insurance cancellation, and we were looking forward to other pleasant outings with bona fide age-appropriate male company. Alas, it was not to be. "I don't feel the same way about Florida anymore," Peter told us a couple of weeks later. With the money from MetLife and the return of his security deposit, he had enough to put down for a little place back in St. Paul where he had a niece and his sister.

"Won't you feel the cold?" I asked, already shivering. "You'll never get out."

"You know, you spend so much of the summer indoors here that it's pretty much a wash."

The day after our farewell party for him, Carol and I were sitting around the condo pool alone—late now, because it was too hot midday—contemplating the inland waterway with its yachts and cigarette boats and noisy personal watercraft. "The bad thing about this place is there're no suitable men," said Carol.

"Now where have I heard that before?"

"When you think of the Hirsch woman, doing them in, as if there were an endless supply."

"Evil," I agreed.

"Pure evil."

"Though there was some justice in this case," I said.

She perked up a little at the recollection. "I think we should have a cocktail."

"I think it should be a strong one."

"We'll drink to older men," she said.

"Wherever they are!"

MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Luciana Frigerio/Graphistock

Round the Bend

We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "January/February Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the July/August Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 237.

BEST OF BREED

ELAINE MENGE

As he had every morning for the past twelve days, Zeus stood at attention at the glass-paned back door, his finely chiseled head held high above powerful shoulders. The dog watched his human caretaker, Travis, open the iron gate, skip up the back steps, and unlock the door. As Travis had every morning of this ritual, while bestowing hearty pats and strokes on Zeus's head and sleek neck, he ardently wished this noble dog were his own.

The security system's rhythmic beeps sounded as Travis greeted the dog. Without needing to think, he leaned toward the keypad and punched in 2002-Off.

Though he'd worked for his sister's dog-sitting business for over two years, never before had he looked after a Great Dane. There had been a surfeit of golden retrievers, Labs, dachshunds, boxers, beagles, schnauzers, and plain old mutts. Next to those ordinary dogs, Zeus seemed deserving of a more advanced zoological classification, several rungs up from *Homo sapiens*.

Zeus had taken to him. Travis wondered if that might be because they were the same age—Zeus's three years nearly equaled Travis's twenty—or because they shared the same coloration. In breeder terminology, Zeus's coat was called blue, and Travis's hair was so black it was blue. That's what his mother often remarked, at least, likening him in a negative way to his absentee father. Despite the black hair, Travis's arms were milky white, streaked with sleek black hairs much like Zeus's clabbered, black-flecked legs. In fact, the Dane's light legs and the diamond-shaped tuft of pearl-grey fur at his chest kept him from being a bona fide exemplar of that version of the breed, his owner, Jill Barth, had told Travis. The coat of a true blue Great Dane showed no white. "But do I care?" she said, the timbre of her voice as light and breezy as her flyaway blond hair. "In my book, Zeus is Superdog. Isn't he magnificent?"

Travis could only agree.

This particular Thursday morning, though the routine was the same, Travis felt a difference when he entered Jill Barth's house.



He couldn't tell if the change was in Zeus, or if it had something to do with the house, or, for that matter, with himself.

The dog's eyes seemed more intentionally expressive; he tilted his head as if posing a question never before expressed. He had to be feeling especially lonely by now. His owner—Jill, as she'd asked Travis to call her—was an athletic-looking woman in her forties who'd only recently moved to North Carolina. She'd been gone on a hiking trip in Switzerland for twelve days now, longer than Zeus had ever been without her. Great Danes, strictly people dogs, suffered abandonment syndrome keenly. They weren't good candidates for kenneling. Thus Jill had rung up Canine Experts and arranged for Travis to visit three times a day. Since last Friday, Travis had begun donating a fourth visit, dropping by at night. He hated to think of Zeus yearning for companionship through the evening hours.

Travis narrowed his eyes and scanned the kitchen. Was the something different *here*, in this room? He checked out the two towers of mail on the white-tiled kitchen island. One of his duties was to collect Jill's mail from the communal boxes down the block and deposit it here. Did the stacks seem shorter? Were they leaning more, or less, than they had yesterday?

The catalogs, assigned to the second pile—were they now mixed in with the envelopes? Could Zeus have done that in a bored mood? He was surely tall enough to reach over and give the twin towers a push with his nose, but nothing had toppled. Still, the stacks looked different, unequal in a new way.

Travis decided not to give the issue further thought. He never touched the stacks after depositing each new day's addition, didn't wish to show the slightest interest in his client's mail. A surveillance camera might be whirring away. Some people filmed their help to make sure they were honest and treated their pets well. Didn't they? Jill Barth seemed nice; he liked her. But you could never be sure.

Travis didn't want to make one false step. Not after that other time; that other single woman. Ever since, he sometimes felt he was being filmed. If he showed interest even in a return address, well, that could lead to something else, couldn't it—like a desire to open an envelope, to learn more. That's what they'd say; that's what they'd said. The police. And he might be seen doing this, scrutinizing her mail on hidden camera.

He knew better now, had learned to squelch that kind of curiosity. Just two years ago, that kind of curiosity had nearly ruined his life; at least, their suspicion of it had.

Had he behaved in the way they'd suggested, violated that other

woman's privacy? Travis couldn't be sure anymore. He'd never opened one envelope, but since being accused, he had trouble separating what people said about him and his motives from what he'd actually done and who he truly was.

They accused him of opening the letters and bills, but he hadn't. He knew he hadn't.

He'd noticed that other woman's return addresses, though, and this he confessed. They looked at him funny then. The police. Why had he confessed taking note of the return addresses, as if that were a crime? Idle curiosity. That's all it was. He couldn't remember one address. But the admission became a hot issue. His questioners' eyes narrowed into even more suspicious slits after he mentioned perusing the addresses. "Why?" they asked. "You wanted to know everything about her, right? You read her journals too." They'd found the journals strewn all over the place.

Travis steadied himself against the island counter and gulped for air. "Good boy," he said to Zeus. Resolving to exert more control, he let in a deep breath, then another, exhaling slowly—a breathing strategy his therapist had taught him. He hadn't suffered anxiety symptoms for six months now, hadn't thought much about hidden cameras or return addresses for a long time. What had revived the old fears? A different atmosphere, a subtle change in the house.

Jill Barth's house had an open floor plan. He turned around and from the kitchen was able to take in the living room with its soaring ceiling and huge window at one end that afforded a view of the pool. The window was impressive, nearly two stories tall and pointy at the top, like a stained-glass window in a church, though the glass was clear.

What a bright, lively landscape out there, Travis thought, taking note of the flowing water and tree branches countering the breeze. Palmettos and fleecy fern were planted on either side of a sandstone waterfall that fed the baby-blue pool. Fat pots of gold and purple lantana also bordered the rushing water, flanked by smaller terra cotta containers bursting with moss roses. Set a little apart was a big blue plastic pot that didn't really go with the rest. It held an odd plant with flat, green spidery arms about three feet tall. "That's a Night-blooming Cereus. It makes a weird, primitive white flower," Jill had told him. "Really thrives farther south—blooms once a year, after midnight. June, August? You have to be vigilant. It's scary; it either takes you by surprise, or you miss it entirely."

Remembering Jill's remark, he hiked his shoulders and gave his head a wincing shake, for he felt the same could be said of his own

life, which often seemed a scary surprise. At other times, he feared that whatever he was meant for would bloom unseen and be missed altogether.

The living room looked undisturbed. Two cozy chenille-upholstered chairs framed the huge window. Set back from these, facing the window, was a chocolate leather sofa fronted by a slate-topped coffee table displaying an assortment of gardening magazines.

Travis sniffed the air. Did the house now emit an alien smell? Not urine, or the other. Zeus was too classy to have accidents. No—more like a rum-based cologne.

He cleared his throat with a laugh meant for Zeus's ears. Not a good idea to show his own anxiety. Dogs could pick up a nervous mood and adopt it in a moment.

In the pantry he grabbed a bag marked "Zeus's Breakfast." Zeus nodded approval as Travis filled his dish, mounted on a stand that came up to the Dane's chest. While the dog ate, Travis refreshed his water bowl.

Miss Barth—Jill—clearly loved Zeus, and she paid a premium for his care. The fee for a single visit was fifteen dollars. This included a walk and feeding. She'd contracted for three visits a day. For Great Danes the charge was twenty-five for any visit that included a feeding. These dogs needed exercise, but despite their powerful build, their digestive systems were delicate. A Great Dane should never be exercised within an hour before or after eating. That's where the increase in price came in. If exercised too soon after eating, Zeus's stomach was liable to a condition called bloat—a serious event. After a meal, exercise could cause a Great Dane's stomach to flop over and become twisted at the juncture of the esophagus at the upper end and the duodenum at the other, a painful condition that required emergency surgery. If no one were around to help, the dog could die within hours. Prevention was the best cure.

If Travis was meant to walk him—and walking a Great Dane was important—he'd have to wait an hour first. Time is money in the dog-sitting business as in any other, and Jill Barth was willing to pay.

Realizing that Jill was due home in two days, Travis said, "I'm sure gonna miss you, Zeus old boy."

Zeus gave the jumbo bowl a last savoring lick and looked up at Travis as if weighing the truth of his statement.

"I'll see you, if your mama goes away again soon. But I start college in September, for real this time. Won't be dog-sittin' after that."

Two years earlier, Travis had graduated from Reynolds High in

Winston-Salem and was set to begin classes at Carolina State that fall, his goal to become a veterinarian. At least, that had been his plan before the arrest.

"You were never *arrested*," his sister Libby reminded him whenever he used that word. "You were detained."

The difference didn't seem great to him then and didn't now. In light of more recent events, he guessed if what had happened then had happened now, he'd be designated by that neutral but no less chilling term, "person of interest."

Travis's throat went dry; a swallow felt like sandpaper against his larynx. Why dwell on that old stuff? No point. He opened the refrigerator and appraised the line of Corona beers Jill Barth had said he was welcome to. He hadn't touched any in all the days he'd been sitting Zeus, but this morning, not exactly happy hour, he fingered one and searched for a bottle opener in a junk drawer. Rummaging an ordinary kitchen drawer with an unopened beer bottle in one hand seemed safe. Nothing suggestive about that if caught on video. After all, she'd invited him to enjoy the beer.

While Zeus digested his food, Travis usually read. He liked biographies and science. Today, though, he left the book he'd intended to read on the kitchen island. Beer in hand, he opened the back door, encouraging Zeus to follow him out to the pool. Its cascading waterfall had kicked on when he'd first arrived. Travis dropped onto a cushioned redwood lounge chair and pressed the cold bottle against his forehead. Zeus licked Travis's elbow, then stood at the pool's edge, chin high, surveying his domain.

After enjoying many long, smooth gulps, Travis looked up at the huge back window. This house, if without the fancy churchlike window, reminded him of that other one, two years ago, back when he was primed for college. It happened just three weeks after he took Mary to their prom. And after it happened, her parents said she couldn't see him again, and his whole life took a dive straight down to nowhere.

He frowned at the second story. It wasn't a huge house; but still, why would a single woman buy a two story in a subdivision like this? That other woman had done the same. This was a family type neighborhood, a relatively new, planned community. A few older folks, maybe, but mostly the neighborhood was made up of young couples with children.

The other woman's name had been Marilyn. She'd owned a Pomeranian. Not Travis's favorite breed, but it turned out to be a sweet little dog, if high strung.

He remembered the day Marilyn Finley interviewed him. Same

time of year, early June. Marilyn's best friend was there. Both were excited, about to go off together on what they stressed was one of those expensive cruises to Hawaii.

Travis's sister had sent him out on that call, to get the feeding and walking schedule for the Pomeranian straight. It was his first sitting job that summer.

Marilyn Finley had moved to Winston-Salem only a month earlier, she told him during the interview. She was looking forward to the fall, seeing the leaves change, since she was from South Louisiana where fall colors never showed. The best friend sat in on the meeting, a sappy, vacant look on her face while she talked baby talk to the Pomeranian who balanced on all fours in her lap.

Just then, Zeus let out a single bark, a rich low note, full of authority. Travis's body jolted in the redwood lounge as if he'd received a thousand volts. Great Danes were not barkers. Travis didn't know where the bark had come from or what it meant, but he suddenly recalled something he hadn't remembered until this very moment—that during his interview with Marilyn Finley, while the girlfriend was goo-gooing the Pomeranian, the phone rang, its piercing ringer jolting Travis much like Zeus's bark had just done. It was a pink portable, set beside Marilyn on a table, and she'd immediately picked it up. "Can't talk now," Marilyn Finley had said to the caller. She'd nodded and pointed at the receiver while rolling her eyes at her friend.

"Not that satyr guy again," the friend said. Marilyn answered, "Not satyr, but *satyr*." Made no sense to Travis, since she'd simply repeated the same word. Marilyn laughed and added, "Maybe you got it right the first time, hon."

Funny, he was only now remembering that call. Zeus's bark had brought it back. Would it have meant anything to the police? Didn't matter now. If the caller were important, Marilyn's friend would have told them:

Marilyn Finley was, Travis had to admit, kind of sexy. Late forties, maybe even fifty, but sexy all the same, with swishy hips, fluttery hands, heart-shaped face fringed with short, grayish blond hair—platinum, he believed they called that shade. She wore white cropped pants with a wide, shiny black belt, jungle-patterned blouse, big fat pink and turquoise beads around her neck. Her feet were tiny, with pink toenails to match the beads. She'd met him at the door barefoot, then slipped into a pair of silver sandals.

Nice enough, but he'd felt turned off. Her brand of sexiness did not attract him. She was loud, too familiar. The friend as well. Both of them drinking Bloody Marys, they joked about how young

he was, how cool looking in his distressed jeans. "I would have gone for you in a big way," Marilyn said in the middle of dictating feeding instructions. The two women giggled like schoolgirls. He was aware of clamping his lips tight, forcing a smile.

"Oh, if you were a blond, you'd be blushing," said the friend. "But you haven't got the color for it. Your hair's black as old dad's shoe polish, isn't it?"

"Shoe polish," he'd repeated, feeling pressured to answer, as the last comment had ended with the upward lilt of a question mark. They giggled at that response too.

"You're just perfect," Marilyn said. "Tweedy will be in good hands. I couldn't enjoy the cruise if I thought she was pining in a cage in some urine-soaked kennel."

Marilyn was due back in fifteen days. "If anyone calls, particularly if my real estate agent calls, tell them I've left for parts unknown." She giggled. "I plan on spending an extra night in Frisco. Not sure, but pretty sure. Count on coming here for fifteen days, starting this Friday."

As it turned out, Marilyn Finley hadn't spent an extra night in San Francisco. On the morning of Travis's last scheduled day for sitting the Pomeranian, he found Marilyn on a twin bed in an upstairs bedroom, nude, a length of gold-striped sheet spiraled around her body, her throat. The small champagne-colored dog, Tweedy—yipping; plainly traumatized—led him up there. Tweedy shunned breakfast in order to make an impression on him, to encourage him to follow her so that she could show him all that she had lost.

Remembering that scene now, beside Jill Barth's pool, Travis shut his eyes and put the beer bottle to his lips. Whenever he thought of one little bit of that event, the whole story unreeled in his head—that is, the aftermath, which for him was the worst, most long-lasting part.

He'd called his sister first. Couldn't believe what he'd seen and needed to talk to someone he knew, as a way of coming back down to earth. He'd grasped at once that Marilyn Finley was dead, immediately averted his eyes. Standing in the doorway, he called her name. "Miss Finley?" Tweedy pushed her wet nose against his leg and emitted a squeaky bark as if asking for his prognosis. He'd purposefully blurred his eyes, backing out of the room. Didn't want to see more, or believe what he'd seen.

As he skipped down the stairs, he experienced a sensation that stuck with him for a long time afterward—a feeling of being watched. By whomever had done this to Miss Finley? Or by someone making a movie of his reaction? Big eye in the sky? He was

chased downstairs by that silent observer. Out of breath, he called his sister.

"You're putting me on," Libby had answered, and then, once his voice left no doubt, she bellowed with some vehemence: "Call the police. Call them!"

Of course. You called the police when something like this was discovered. He hadn't thought of it. He'd first wanted to verify his own sanity by talking this over with someone real. After hanging up with his sister, he thought of calling his girlfriend, Mary, and then considered his football coach, who'd been the nearest person to a father to him in the last three years, even though Travis had spent most of the last season on the bench. But he did as Libby directed and called the police.

Those friendly public servants "detained" him for eight hours. Seemed like eight days. So many questions, same ones over and over with slight variations. "Did you touch the body? Did you ever go upstairs before today? Did you at any time disturb anything upstairs? Did you move the body? Where exactly were you standing when you first viewed the body? How close did you come to the body?"

Marilyn Finley, in their vocabulary, was now "the body."

Had he frequented other rooms? The master bedroom, bath, the room she used as an office?

No, he'd only spent time in the kitchen and living room and had used the guest bathroom off the kitchen a few times.

Had he rummaged through desk drawers, bureau drawers?

No. He'd never set foot in her office or bedroom.

They questioned him about the alarm system. Travis explained that the code he used was the same one their sitters used at every house—2002-Off. "We call it the slave code," Travis said. "We never know the master code." Before leaving on her trip, Marilyn had to plug in Canine Expert's slave code instead of her usual master code. If she hadn't done that, Travis couldn't enter the house without setting off the alarm. Once Marilyn returned, she could go back to using the master code. No one from Canine Experts could get into her house without setting off the alarm then, since they wouldn't know that combination of numbers.

"What about the key?" the detective asked.

Sure, Travis had Marilyn's house key. He'd used the key *and* Canine Experts's slave code to get in.

From the newspaper, Travis learned that there had been no forced entry. Marilyn Finley had returned from her trip in the evening, one day early. It was doubtful that she'd let her killer in, since she'd come home late at night. The most likely scenario was

that the killer was already inside, waiting. He had both the key and the code.

Travis filled the bill. That's what the skinny detective's face said when he asserted, "Whoever killed her had key and code, and he knew she'd changed her plans."

"But I didn't know—I didn't know she'd come back a day early," Travis said. "She told me she'd stay another day."

His questioner gave him a sneer that let Travis know he was as inconsequential and disgusting as a bug.

For hours he was grilled on the alarm code and other matters of fact. Easy questions, if tedious. Then the questioning shifted from facts to feelings. How did he feel about Marilyn Finley? Was he attracted? Did he think of her while she was away? Could he describe her?

"I only met her once," he answered. "Didn't think of her one way or another."

When they started asking those "feeling" questions, he tensed. "Are you saying I'm a suspect?"

"We want to understand your relationship to the victim." That was the skinny detective's line, the one with the bobbing Adam's apple and thinning hair. What saved him from being like that Barney Fife character Travis had seen on TV reruns was his deliberate method of collecting information. He wasn't going off half-cocked like Barney, but with his layered questions seemed to be building a carefully composed work of art. He scared Travis more than Marilyn's lifeless body had.

"Can you describe your relationship to the deceased?"

Travis's mouth hinged open. "I babysat her dog, for Christ's sake. Met her all of one time."

"Odd kind of job for a young fella like you. How you feel about babysitting little toy doggies?"

"I just graduated. I'm going to State in the fall, with a scholarship, working part time for expenses. My sister owns the business. She does pretty well."

"How you feel about working for Big Sis? What exactly is your relationship?"

Travis squinted. "Our relationship is she's my sister."

After eight hours he was allowed to go. "Make yourself available in the next few days," the skinny detective warned.

That night Libby drove him home. He felt grateful that his mother was away, visiting his grandmother in Durham. Travis guessed that his own car, a secondhand Jeep, must still be parked in Finley's driveway. He later learned the police had searched it without a warrant.

"What about Tweedy?" Travis asked Libby. He'd worried about the Pomeranian even during questioning. When the police first stampeded into the house, Tweedy cowered under the sofa, emitting frightened squeaks.

Tweedy was fine. Libby had retrieved her, brought her home to join her own menagerie. "Take a shower. Get some rest," she said, hugging her brother before she left.

He took a bath, not his usual shower. He was too weak and dizzy to stand up in a shower.

Next morning, the murder was in the paper. Marilyn Finley had been raped and strangled after returning from a Hawaiian cruise. Until reading the article, Travis hadn't known how she'd died. His questioners never told him. From the paper he also learned that Marilyn was divorced. No children. Her ex-husband was not a suspect. He worked for Aramco in Saudi Arabia. Good alibi, Travis thought. If only he were on the other side of the planet too.

His name wasn't mentioned—only that a dog-sitter who'd been caring for Finley's Pomeranian had found her body and been detained for questioning. Near the end of the item came a quote from Finley's friend, with whom she'd vacationed. "That boy, the dog-sitter, he gave me the creeps. Marilyn should never have invited a stranger into her home. The ad says they're all bonded, but is that true? What does bonded mean anyway? What's it worth?"

At least the name of his sister's company hadn't been mentioned. Libby was thankful for that, but also said she wouldn't have blamed Travis if it had been hawked in neon lights. Not for a moment did she believe him guilty; his misfortune was being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Mary, Travis's girlfriend, showed a different attitude. Only weeks before, she'd cried on his shoulder at the thought of their impending separation at summer's end when he would attend State while she was going farther afield, accepted as a music major at Rice University.

"Mother saw that story in the paper!" Mary said when he phoned next morning. She couldn't have sounded more horrified if she were a 1950s' horror-movie scream queen. "You mean that was *you*? You found the dead lady?"

When he confirmed that fact, instead of saying how awful for you, or how can I help, she asked, "You mean, *you're* the one? That woman's friend . . . she was talking about *you*? She said the dog-sitter boy gave her the creeps."

Travis had no answer for that, or for a second nugget of information Mary volunteered. "After reading it, Mom said, 'I'll bet that boy did it.' She had no idea they were talking about you!"

He was about to blurt, "The old bag didn't say I gave her the creeps at the time. They said I was cool, the type they'd want to date if they were young." But he held back. The remark, though true, sounded smarmy and suspicious.

That afternoon, feeling he didn't know his own name anymore, Travis was called in for a second interview. He endured a new battery of questions about his upbringing, how his dad had bugged out, his interests, which television shows he watched. As before, he was allowed to go home afterward.

The second round of questioning sealed his fate with Mary. "Dad won't let me see you." She sounded not at all distressed by her father's tyranny. "He says the police don't bring anybody in for questioning a second time unless they have serious cause."

"I am not a killer rapist," Travis rasped over the phone, amazed that he was even using those words. "I can't believe you think I did this. Are you insane?"

"I don't like your tone, Travis." Mary paused. "I am not insane. I'm cautious, and I don't want to be mixed up in—like Mother calls it—this sordid mess."

"Well rid of her," Libby said, when she heard about that conversation. "Now you know. She believes a newspaper over her own experience. If she'd been Juliet to your Romeo—well—there wouldn't have been a play."

Travis didn't know what upset him more, his disillusionment with Mary, or with himself for believing he loved someone who trusted him so little and who showed no compassion. He'd loved Mary, but now felt nothing. What was love, anyway, if it could evaporate overnight?

The investigators initiated a third round. Travis's mother was home by then and advised that he not go without a lawyer. He ignored her advice, unwilling to taint the fact of his own innocence by taking such a step.

It was during the third interview that he'd acknowledged glancing at Marilyn Finley's mail, at the return addresses. The skinny, methodical detective, Mr. Quick was his name, acted as if he'd struck the mother lode, the confession of the century. Based on that small admission, a search warrant for his mother's house was secured. A mortifying experience for her, for them both. The most incriminating evidence they turned up were three copies of *Playboy* Travis had left in his bookcase. They confiscated his computer. Weeks later, after finding no porn sites or snuff movies accessed, no predatory e-mails transmitted, they returned the machine; the main drive and all of his files were totally screwed up.

By August, two weeks before Travis was to start college, the harassment ceased. No matter, he was in no shape to enroll. He spent most days in his room reading science fiction novels that transported him to better universes. Two months later he began seeing a therapist; gradually, he got back to work, helping his sister with sitting jobs again. Hard at first. An eerie sense of being watched by accusing eyes stuck with him for a long time.

Libby sometimes gave him a nudge, claiming he was painting himself into a corner. She wanted him to go out more and to prepare to enroll at State that spring. He was too depressed to imagine doing that. He could only relate to animals. You could trust animals, not people. He certainly couldn't trust his own judgment, his own heart.

The DNA report was finally released. The murderer had been meticulous. Nothing matching Travis's DNA was found; but then again, nothing was found, period. Travis wasn't cleared. He was reminded then of the last thing Mr. Quick said to him the day of his third interview: "I know you did it. Just can't prove it. Yet."

But then something happened that did clear him, in Mary's mind, at least. The following May, nearly a year after Marilyn Finley's death, another woman was found. She, too, had hired a sitter for her Persian cat. Like Marilyn, she was a new arrival in the area and had been expected back from a trip—this one to Cancun. The pet-sitting company was run by a competitor, the employee also a kid just out of high school. Travis wondered if his girlfriend had dumped *him* and if all *his* hopes and dreams had been destroyed.

Soon after that story came out, Mary called. "I know it wasn't you now," she said. "It couldn't have been." She rushed to explain, practically giving a précis of the recent article. When she had a free moment, she wanted to team up with Travis to do some sleuthing, figure out who this serial killer was.

It seemed Mary had assumed the persona of Nancy Drew and decided to let her old boyfriend tag along on this adventure, to help her solve the mystery that caused their break-up.

At the memory of her absurd monologue, Travis let out a groan that echoed in the beer bottle as he put it to his lips. Zeus ambled over and pushed his blue muzzle against Travis's neck.

"I'm boring you. Sorry, boy." Lucky dog, he thought—lucky not to be human and have to deal with the tardily contrite Nancy Drews of the world. Travis sat up and checked his watch. "How about it? Time for a walk."

He returned at noon, five, and eight that evening—the last visit,

a freebie. The mail he added to the two stacks at noon looked no different later on.

Next day, the last for sitting Zeus, his visits once again were ordinary. He hadn't planned to work in another freebie that night, but later, realizing it might be the last time he ever saw Zeus, he drove to the house at seven.

Still light outside, another pleasant June evening. Nothing seemed amiss, but when he opened the door, the alarm's beep did not sound. The mail on the island counter was obviously rearranged.

"Hello down there!"

Travis nearly gave himself whiplash, so suddenly did the rich, booming voice cause him to cock his head back and roll his eyes up toward the catwalk that spanned the top floor.

A light flicked on above, revealing an older man of indeterminate age, neatly dressed—white dress shirt, cuffs casually turned up at the wrists—forearms braced against the blond wood railing, smiling down at him. The smile was benevolent, full of flawless white teeth. He looked like an older version of Travis's senior high class president who'd been too confident to bother asking for his vote, oozing charm designed to win that vote in any case. Or same difference, he looked like one of those male models in catalogs marketed for distinguished older men; hair silver, close cropped; handsome face dimpled in all the right places, a healthy tan. He looked the type who frequented posh resorts, had his nails done, hair frosted, a guy who spent months lounging poolside in the Caribbean, sipping drinks out of glasses that had trinkets hanging off their rims, making the women around those pools wish he'd notice them. Despite his movie-star glow, he also looked familiar on a more local level. Travis wondered if he'd seen this guy on TV commercials.

Zeus nudged Travis's hip, as if the presence of this ultra-cool man was what Zeus had been trying to clue him in on all along. Travis choked, aspirating his own surprise. He held up a hand, stepped backward as if to excuse himself. When he found his voice, he asked, "Who are you?"

"Great view, up here." The man was gazing out the cathedral-like window at the pool, still visible in the waning light. "Not to worry, I'm Jill's brother-in-law." As he spoke, Zeus loped up the stairs and came to stand beside the stranger. "Good old boy," the man said, patting his head. "This dog and me, we're longtime friends."

Zeus accepted the pat without enthusiasm.

Travis put his hands on his hips and felt his neck lengthen, as if

he were turning into a fussy old-maid schoolteacher. "Jill didn't say anything about a visitor."

"Sure, sure," the man said. "This was unexpected. To cut to the chase, I'm Steve Bonds, Jill's brother-in-law. A pilot with Delta. I had a layover here—as I do sometimes—and Jill said, why don't you stay at my new house if you ever come this way? Too bad, we're just missing each other—my timing's always off—but she wanted me to see the new place. Of course, this isn't as convenient as my digs near the airport, but she wanted me to come." A rummy cologne scent wafted down.

Travis was nodding, trying to compose himself at the same time. "She didn't mention having a sister. You're married to her sister?"

The man laughed as he smoothed out his cuffs. "Actually, I'm her ex-husband's sister's husband, but that gets confusing, doesn't it? Even when Jill was still married to Allen, I was never sure what to call our relationship, technically, if you know what I mean."

Travis was still nodding, his thoughts bouncing around. No stranger had ever shown up during a job before. He wasn't sure what to do, what Libby would expect him to do. The idea of calling her struck him as wimpy. He could demand identification, a driver's license, but that seemed very forward coming from someone half this guy's age. Steve looked like he could be a pilot. All those models in men's magazines *looked* like they could be pilots.

Travis asked the next best question: "When're you leaving?"

The man who said his name was Steve straightened up as if he had a crick in his back, then once more let his forearms rest on the railing. "Well, looks like Jill and I will be passing like ships in the night. She's due tomorrow morning, I'm pretty sure, and I have to get to the airport by five A.M., some hours before that."

Steve encouraged Travis to go ahead and do whatever he had to with Zeus as usual. As for himself, he was beat, ready to get some "shut eye." "Don't bother about me. I'll stay out of your way." Then he offered to feed Zeus his breakfast in the morning, save Travis a trip.

"I'm not scheduled to come tomorrow," Travis answered. "Miss Barth—Jill—said she'd arrive early. I'll call later tomorrow, of course, to make sure her flight wasn't delayed."

"Good idea." Steve yawned. "Hey, I'm about to pass out. No need to put on the alarm when you go. I'll do it when I leave." He gave the catwalk railing a push, then disappeared. Travis heard an upstairs door close. The light above the catwalk clicked off.

Zeus pranced down the stairs at the sound of Travis opening a bag of treats. After Zeus gobbled up a handful, Travis brought him outside and once more rested in the lounge chair. He needed to

think about this latest event. Right now, he didn't give a rat's ass what this Steve guy would think of him sitting poolside with a beer.

Zeus gave the Night-blooming Cereus a sniff, causing Travis to notice that the plant had sprouted three pregnant-looking shapes at the ends of its flat, leathery leaves. Those bulbous things looked ripe. Perhaps tomorrow, after midnight, the primitive flowers would open and attract the moth Jill had mentioned—some exotic moth that would spread pollen and ensure a blooming next year.

Zeus bent his head to one of the closed blooms. Pricking his ears, he faced the huge back window as he'd done the day before and let out a single, emphatic bark. The bark brought the memory of the phone call back, and Marilyn's cryptic words: "*Satyr*, not *satyr*."

Though the June evening was far from cool, Travis shook off a chill. This Steve guy had told Travis not to set the alarm, that he'd do it himself when he left.

But what if Jill's flight were delayed? Steve knew the master code, right? That's the code he'd plug in when he left for the airport. Travis knew only the slave code. If Travis did have to come back to feed Zeus after all, his slave code wouldn't work. If he opened the door, he wouldn't be able to stop the alarm from going off.

He'd simply have to tell the guy before he left. After he gave Zeus a short walk under the streetlamps, he'd tell Steve, yell up the stairs if he had to—let him know he should plug in the slave code.

But what if Steve was sleeping? Travis didn't want to go up those stairs and knock. He didn't want to yell up the stairs either. He was having uneasy feelings again, of someone watching him. Felt it right now.

Was Steve really taking a nap, or was he up there on the catwalk, looking out the window at him this very minute? Was he really a pilot, or a serial murderer? Or an undercover police officer ready to pin some new crime on him?

What crime?

This was nuts, paranoia. If Steve was really a detective, why would he let Travis see him? Or if he was a murderer—the murderer—again, how stupid to let himself be seen. The real killer would have come later, much later tonight, if his plan was to get Jill Barth when she arrived home in the morning.

Steve had to be who he said he was. The other possibilities didn't make sense. As for the alarm code, instead of calling up to Steve

and telling him, Travis would leave a message, write it out big and tape it to the back door so Steve couldn't miss it in the morning. "When you leave, please enter 2002-Off on the alarm pad—in case Jill's flight is delayed—so I can still feed Zeus."

Travis gave Zeus a walk, then wrote out the note and taped it to the door. "I'll miss you, boy," he said, giving the dog a farewell pat on his blue-black head. "You take care." He gazed up at the cat-walk, not liking it that the man was up there in one of those rooms. Turning back to Zeus, he said, "You be alert. Don't be such a nice guy."

Travis lived in a small apartment now, and that night he went home feeling lonelier than usual. In bed, propped against pillows, he couldn't concentrate on his book, a mystery set on a planet even weirder than Earth. He was still playing the what-if game.

What if Steve was a liar, a predator, lying in wait?

Travis assumed that Steve had used the master code to disengage the alarm because Jill had given it to him. But now he realized Steve could have disarmed the system another way—by using the same slave code Canine Experts used.

If this guy was lying about his identity, was really a killer, he could have hired his sister's pet-sitting service himself, before Travis had come on board—hired the other company, too, learned their secret code. No secret about it! Maybe this man hadn't plugged in the master code at all, didn't even know the master, but had used 2002-Off because he knew Jill Barth had hired Canine Experts.

But how had he come by a key?

Even if Steve was Jill's dear ex-brother-in-law, Travis doubted she'd mailed him one. Maybe she'd done as many others do, hid a spare inside a fake rock—something like that—and she'd told Steve where it was. How else could he get in? Travis had been alert enough to check the front and back doors before leaving. Neither had been forced. Of course, if Steve wasn't a relation but a bad guy, he could have entered through a window. Travis hadn't checked, had no desire to go into the other rooms, any more than he wished to scrutinize return addresses on Jill's envelopes.

He thought of another way Steve could have gained access. He might be a cop! This whole trip—Jill Barth included—might be a gigantic fairy tale, a setup. They could be waiting for him to make a move in the morning. If so, they'd be disappointed.

He considered calling Libby, asking her if she smelled a rotten fish here; but it would be so like a little brother, unsure of his

own mind, asking big sister. Why couldn't he go with his own intuition?

He was making himself sick, hashing and rehashing the possibilities. He was back to thinking about the police again, and once more the idea occurred to him that no undercover officer would have shown himself either. But that could simply have been a misstep. They didn't know he'd begun adding a fourth visit, a freebie for Zeus. When he'd showed up late this evening, maybe that had put their guy off balance. Believing the dog might give him away, "Steve" came out of hiding, concocted the brother-in-law story as well as the flying-out-early-next-morning story.

Steve had been convincing. For all Travis knew, a platoon of cops might be waiting up there now, waiting to see if he'd return in the morning, ready to pounce on Jill.

"Won't be there," Travis said, eyelids growing heavy. "No way." His jangled nerves surrendered to sleep.

Travis dreamed. Zeus was leading him up and down and around a labyrinth, its walls made of tall box hedges. When Zeus reached the labyrinth's heart, he barked. That dreamland bark woke Travis up.

Five A.M. Steve should be leaving for the airport by now. He'd see the note beside the keypad on the back door and, before going, arm the system by entering the code used by Canine Experts.

That's what should be happening now, at least, if Steve was who he said he was. If Steve was a cop, he'd be in for a long wait, as would the backup crew who shared that monotony.

But if Steve was the murderer, he'd be preparing for Jill's arrival. This time he wouldn't be dealing with a helpless little yip-yip Pomeranian. When Travis entered Marilyn Finley's house the morning after her murder two years ago, Tweedy had had free run of the place. The murderer must have simply shut the door in Tweedy's face after he'd dragged Marilyn into that upstairs room. When he left, he'd merely brushed the dog aside as he made his escape.

Zeus would not be as easily brushed off. This time, the killer would have to think ahead. If I were him, Travis thought, I'd lock Zeus in the utility room just before Jill's due to arrive.

Travis hated the idea of Zeus being locked up.

Or something worse could be done in preparation. The Pomeranian's yapping had been ignored, but Zeus's barking could easily summon a passerby or let Jill know something was wrong before she even set foot in the house. To prevent that tip-off, the killer might slit Zeus's throat.

Travis jumped out of bed and began pulling on his pants.

If Steve was Jill's brother-in-law, he'd be gone by now. If he was a cop, Travis would catch hell, showing up the day Jill was due back. But if Steve was the guy who'd killed Marilyn Finley and that other woman—shit—he'd better get over there now to save Zeus and Jill both.

He reached the house in half an hour. Six A.M., still dark out, he parked his Jeep in front of a greenbelt farther down the street.

Travis walked toward the house, his pace slow but steady, grateful that the neighborhood was thickly wooded, making it less likely that anyone would spot him. He took care to be quiet but also decided to enter the house no differently than he would any other morning. He wasn't some slinking cat burglar, after all, and didn't want to give that impression to anyone who happened to see him.

He was relieved when, reaching the back gate, he saw Zeus at his post, waiting on the other side of the glass-paned door. No lights were on inside that he could see. Steve must have been telling the truth and was gone now.

When Travis opened the back door, though, the alarm did not emit its normal rhythmic beeps. He didn't have to enter a code to turn it off because the alarm had simply never been set. The note he'd taped to the door was missing. Steve had seen it but left without arming the system.

So the guy was careless, a forgetful pilot. No harm. But Travis still felt nervous. Zeus, usually a paragon of calm dignity, seemed antsy too.

Travis flipped on the light and saw that all of the envelopes on the island had been ripped open; their contents scattered. Chilled, he stumbled backward. He'd seen a similar sight before. Could there be a logical explanation? Maybe Jill asked Steve to check her mail. She might be expecting an important bill, but that didn't make sense since she was due home today. Whatever the reason, he hoped that when Jill returned, she wouldn't think he'd done this.

Zeus pushed his nose against the small of Travis's back and jerked his head toward the living room. He pranced to the staircase and cocked his head, looking up its length.

Steve must still be here, Travis thought, feeling no urge to run upstairs to find out.

He tried to remember what he'd planned to do in case Steve was still around. Call the police. Might be a false alarm, and he'd look like a colossal idiot afterward, but better safe than sorry.

Now that he was poised to place the call, the idea of the police

made him sick, considering what they'd put him through before. Instead of calling, he should simply round Zeus up and clear out. Yes, take Zeus out front and remain there until Jill arrived in the taxi. Then he could tell her about "Steve," find out if that guy was the real deal.

Floorboards creaked overhead.

"Come on, boy," Travis called. The dog remained frozen at the bottom of the stairs. "Zeus, heel! Let's go!"

The Great Dane would not budge.

"Damn." Travis turned away, heading for the phone that sat in its cradle near the back door. There, beside the phone, on the narrow counter where Jill kept recipe books, he spied a pair of tan gloves placed next to a wicked-looking carving knife. He shuddered as he reached for the phone. That knife was meant for Zeus. He knew it.

"I thought you weren't scheduled for today."

Travis spun around, the portable in his hand. Steve's buttery voice betrayed no hint of worry. He wore a black T-shirt, black sweatpants. Hands in pockets, he entered the kitchen from the living room.

"Thought I'd show up anyway, you know. Feed Zeus. I'm afraid Miss Barth's flight's been delayed," Travis said, aware that he was no good at bluffing. "And you? Thought you were leaving before five."

"Change of plans." Steve smiled, shrugged. "My timing's off again, looks like."

Sure, Travis thought, remembering the gloves and the knife, set out at the ready. Travis only hoped this guy didn't know he'd seen. All he had to do now was get Zeus safely out or call the police. Two chances. Just who Steve really was could be sorted out later.

Steve asked, "You heard that, did you? The flight's been delayed?" Still smiling his easy, excessively white, cosmetic-dentist smile, he took another step forward.

"Yeah, well, not exactly. But better safe than sorry."

"You making a call?"

Zeus, standing just behind Steve, lowered his head and growled. The growl didn't seem to register with Steve, so intent was he on the phone in Travis's hand.

Travis hiked his shoulders. "Calling my boss. Forgot my feeding schedule. She'll tell me who's next on the list." He chuckled, calculating how fast he could thumb in 911.

"Kind of early, don't you think? To call." Steve's smile glittered.

"She's always up early. No problem." Travis moved his thumb to the nine and punched it, then angled upward.

"I'd put that down if I were you, son."

Travis thumbed the one.

The man whipped his hands out of his pockets and lunged. In a blur, Travis saw a gun palmed in Steve's hand. The phone went flying. Steve shoved him up against the recipe desk, curled his left hand around Travis's neck, thumb to its center. He pressed like a machine programmed to keep pushing to the other side. At the same time, he cracked the gun against Travis's head, just above his right ear.

Zeus's growl became a roar. He sprang at the man's shoulders. Travis could feel his own eyes rolling back in his head. He couldn't see a thing, but he could hear the clicking, snapping, gnashing of Zeus's teeth. The dog must have clamped down onto Steve's wrist, for he heard the gun clatter to the floor and a moan of pain.

The pressure on Travis's neck ceased as Steve whirled around and threw his hands up to protect himself from Zeus.

Travis slid away from the action, guiding his lower back along the edge of the desk. Choking for air, he managed to keep on sliding, now in a downward direction to the floor. He grabbed the gun.

He didn't need it.

The fight had moved to the center of the kitchen, Steve now taking a defensive position, back pressed against the island. Zeus, reared up on his hind legs, towered over his opponent and beat his forepaws, backed by his full weight, against Steve's chest. Steve reached out with both hands, trying to grab Zeus's neck, but the dog, relentlessly pounding his chest, snarling and snatching at his face with bared teeth, was too much for him.

Finding an opening, Zeus sank his canines into Steve's neck and held on briefly, emitting guttural growls. Steve screamed in pain, causing the dog to let go. Blood streamed, a shiny, running mass on Steve's black T-shirt, bright red droplets spattering the white tile floor.

Zeus's growls were so loud, Travis didn't hear the turn of a key in the front door or see that Jill Barth had entered the living room rolling a suitcase behind her.

"What?" Jill came to a halt beside the leather sofa, clearly astounded to see Zeus pinning a man against the island counter, teeth snapping at his face. "Zeus! No!" She ran toward the dog.

"Stay back," Travis yelled at her. "He's dangerous."

"Jonathan—Jonathan Sedar!" Head tilted, she eyed Travis, the torn envelopes, her expression utterly confused. "What's going on? Why's my dog attacking my realtor?"

"Call him off!" The man pulled free of Zeus and lunged away,

rounding the island counter, only to find himself trapped in a corner between the stovetop and sink. "Get him off!"

The man stretched a hand out to his right, grabbing for the slotted, wooden block that held four chef's knives.

Travis stepped up and simply lifted the block of knives off the counter. "Sedar, not satyr," he said, eyes bright with understanding. He stood there with the knife block cradled in the crook of his left arm, mesmerized by Zeus's savagery. The dog had found a fresh hold on the man's neck.

Of course, Travis thought. Realtors had easy access to house keys. When he sold a house to his victim, Jonathan Sedar simply kept a key. Getting the slave code of one or more pet-sitting outfits was a simple matter. On easy talking terms with his clients, he had no trouble learning about their vacation plans.

"Zeus," Jill yelled again. "Stop it. Stop!"

The dog ignored her.

"Why are you *here*, Jonathan?" she managed to spit out.

Sedar couldn't answer as he was now on his knees, smearing blood like fingerpaints across the glossy white tiles. Coiling himself into a ball, he wrapped both hands around the back of his neck, bomb-scare fashion, to ward off the dog's snapping teeth.

"He came to murder you," Travis said.

"That's absurd. Why? Because I wouldn't go out with him?" She glared at Travis as if he should know the answer.

"He's a serial murderer. He killed another woman I sat for, Marilyn Finley. And then another, last year."

"But . . . Jonathan's a million-dollar agent."

"It's the kid," the man managed to rasp from his crouched position on the floor. "I was suspicious. I came to protect you. Call your dog off."

Travis stood in front of Jill, his mouth open. The guy was a murderer, but how could he prove it? This Steve—now Jonathan—was slick. Like those other times, he probably hadn't left any evidence behind, none that couldn't be explained away by saying it all belonged to Travis. He'd say the gun was Travis's, and those gloves, and the knife. Travis had opened the mail, not him. Oh Lordy, he knew what would come next: the police, skinny Mr. Quick, more questions, newspaper stories, his life ruined forever.

Feeling numb, he stared at Jill Barth with wide-open eyes as she glanced back and forth, from him to Jonathan Sedar. The man still cowered on the floor, hemmed in by Zeus's stabbing feet and intimidating growls, his sheer size.

"I'm bleeding. Help me," Sedar groaned. "I tell you, this kid's a killer."

Jill's eyes narrowed. She pulled a cell phone out of the pocket of her tan travel jacket.

"It's the kid, huh, Jonathan?" Her voice was shaky but determined. "The kid's the bad guy?" She thumbed in the magic numbers. "Then why is Zeus attacking you and not the kid? Keep up the good work, boy. Good dog."

Relief flooded Travis's body. She'd put it together. "He's a great dog," Travis said. "The best."

When the police invaded minutes later, Travis learned that he needn't have worried about being believed. Jonathan Sedar had been a much more competent real estate agent than serial murderer.

A pair of handcuffs, among other unsettling objects found in an upstairs bedroom, might easily have been palmed off as Travis's. But one item put the lie to Sedar's version of events. Flipped open on a bedside chair, resting on top of the handcuffs, was a folder containing the papers for his newest listing in a posh Winston-Salem neighborhood. Might as well get some last-minute work done while waiting for his latest victim to enter his trap. Why not?

"I thought Great Danes were called gentle giants," Detective Quick said to Jill and Travis hours later, after two cops escorted Sedar out of the house, his neck heavily wrapped with gauze and tape, hands cuffed behind his back.

"That's what he must have thought," Jill answered. "And they are. But Great Danes will defend those they love to the death. Jonathan didn't have a clue about that, or about the bond that's sprung up between Zeus and Travis."

The detective shrugged. "He didn't count on Travis coming back to make sure the dog was okay either. Good work, son. Just understand, it's my job to be suspicious."

Mr. Quick left them standing by the swimming pool. The pump kicked on; water cascaded down the sandstone waterfall.

"What a homecoming." Jill slumped into one of the lounge chairs and motioned to Travis to take the chair opposite hers. She was pale, eyes unfocused. "It's clear to me, by the way, you saved my life."

"And Zeus saved mine." In more ways than one, he wanted to add.

"Look—the Night-blooming Cereus," she said. "I think tonight's the night. Would you like to come back and see? Please do. Ask someone else too. I'd rather not be alone tonight."

After ten, Travis brought his sister along for the viewing. The three of them sat around the pool, Zeus hunkered at Travis's feet.

"How does one celebrate not getting murdered?" Jill raised a glass of champagne to Travis and Libby as they lifted theirs.

"Throw a Night-blooming Cereus party. Why not? Let's just hope the flowers don't forget to show up."

"That is nice," Libby said, "not getting murdered. I'll toast that."

Libby, Travis thought, was already just the slightest bit tipsy.

Nearing midnight, the mysterious flowers did bloom. Fleishy white, with many layers of pointed petals, they dangled from the leathery leaves on thick, round, curving stems that resembled swans' necks. The air was heavy with a potent scent Travis would never forget. For the second time that day he'd arrived in the right place at the right time.

The flowers were eerie, even scary in a way he couldn't define—like reality, as he'd come to know it. They either took you by surprise or you missed the blooming altogether, Jill had once said. Only now did he fully grasp how close he'd come to missing out on his own life, not so much at the hands of Jonathan Sedar as his own.

Zeus rested his chin on Travis's foot. Travis tipped his glass to honor the Great Dane. He was ready now, eager to step out of the tight corner he'd painted himself into, and meet his future. ↗

Solution to the December "Dying Words"

WORD LIST

- A. Philosophy
- B. Ruth Hussey
- C. Indians
- D. Credit
- E. Enthusiast
- F. Cabaret
- G. Handsome
- H. Alden

- I. Sufficient
- J. Injustice
- K. Namath
- L. Gyrate
- M. Lithe
- N. Index card
- O. Newsworthy
- P. Cities
- Q. Oval Office

- R. Lemons
- S. New Zealand
- T. Shampoo
- U. Kittenish
- V. Inherent
- W. Loaned
- X. Lhasa apso
- Y. Effortless
- Z. Rhinestone

QUOTATION

Author—(David A.) PRICE

Work—CHASING LINCOLN'S KILLER (*Wall Street Journal*, February 11–12, 2006.)

"Imagine—if you can—a famous actor who despises the president. His hatred finally overflows. He seizes the chance to kill the president in front of an audience and runs . . . and the chase is on. This is the historical tale told expertly by James Swanson in 'Manhunt'."

REEL CRIME

STEVE HOCKENSMITH

Max Allan Collins is an in-demand author whose books have been snatched up by literally millions of readers around the globe. So why would he feel like his most successful novels are “the Rodney Dangerfield of popular literature”?

It all goes back to another label, one *Entertainment Weekly* once applied to him: “the novelization king.”

Air Force One, I Spy, U.S. Marshals, Maverick, Saving Private Ryan—Collins handled the script-to-novel transformations for all of them, and many more besides. (His latest adaptation is of the Denzel Washington crime saga *American Gangster*.) And the

Novelization King is also the Tie-In Czar, penning original novels based on *CSI*, *CSI: Miami*, *Bones*, and other hit shows. (His novel *Criminal Minds: Jump Cut* comes out this month.)

If these adaptations and spin-offs sometimes overshadow his well-regarded non-tie-in work, Collins isn't complaining . . . much. After all, as Novelization King, he regularly pops up on the bestseller charts. Go looking for respect for that success, though, and you'll find the kingdom's coffers bare.

“The screenwriters who script the TV episodes are envied and honored,” Collins says, “but [tie-in writers] are viewed as a sort of joke . . . often by writers who sell nowhere near as many copies of their novels.”

Tired of getting the Dangerfield treatment, Collins and fellow tie-in scribe/TV writer Lee Goldberg (*Monk*, *Diagnosis: Murder*) founded their own Friars Club, of sorts: the International Association of Media Tie-In Writers (IAMTW). Though the membership comes largely from the science fiction, fantasy, and horror realms (thanks to franchises like *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*), the mystery genre's represented as well. AHMM contributor Jeremiah Healy is a member, as is Donald Bain, Jessica Fletcher's “collaborator” on dozens of *Murder, She Wrote* novels.

Max Allan Collins. Photo by Bamford Studio





Denzel Washington and Russell Crowe face off in *American Gangster*. © Universal Studios

Collins (IAMTW's president) describes the organization as a conduit for sharing "marketing tips and war stories." And he's got more than a few of each himself. Despite the bias against tie-in writers, for instance, he argues against using a pseudonym for licensed projects.

"I know I'll have a wide audience and hope they'll enjoy the tie-in novel so much that they'll go looking for my original material," he says.

As for war stories, he's got those in spades. One of his favorites: how he wrote the novelization of the 1993 Clint Eastwood thriller *In the Line of Fire* in two weeks.

"I bunkered in and had a lot of help on research from my wife [writer Barbara Collins] and made deadline and then collapsed for about a month," he recalls.

And novelizations don't just have to be done quickly. They need to be done early as well—months before the movie hits theaters.

"I rarely see anything from the finished film when I'm writing these, strictly the screenplays," says Collins (who couldn't just pop over to the studio to see a rough cut even if Security would let him through the gates—he lives in Muscatine, Iowa).

Unlike with novelizations, IAMTW members usually have plenty of material to work with when doing a tie-in novel, including episodes on DVD, scripts, and a series "bible" (a writers' guide to the characters and setting). What they don't have, however, is freedom. Though tie-in authors are expected to come up with dynamic, novel-length stories, the heroes have to remain completely static.

"You can't do anything major with the characters, which is



frustrating," Collins admits. "Nobody from the regular cast can fall in love or get badly injured and have an epiphany or any of the things characters in most novels do."

And everything that does happen has to be approved by the TV network and the show's producers. So instead of the usual novelist's lot—trying to please an editor in New York—a tie-in writer



has a handful of people on both coasts to keep happy.

Obviously, Collins has been remarkably successful at that. Perhaps too successful, in one case: He lost his gig as the go-to guy for *CSI* tie-

ins when the books were still selling like bloody hotcakes.

"I was told it was time for a 'new voice,' and we parted ways on the novels," Collins says. "After selling millions of books for them, I'm not sure why the *CSI* folks took me off the novels, though I suspect it may be because I was becoming too strongly identified as 'the' *CSI* writer, and they of course want *CSI* to be the star, which it is."

Despite his disappointment, Collins isn't bitter. He may be Novelization King and Tie-in Czar, but he knows all too well who has the real power over a licensed project.

"You're playing in their sandbox," Collins says of the studios and networks he deals with. "You don't have the usual rights you have as the writer of something you've wholly created."

Collins found that out the hard way while working on a project he was uniquely qualified for. The 2002 gangster drama *Road to Perdition* was based on a graphic novel Collins wrote, so it was only natural that Collins pen the novelization. Unfortunately, what started off seeming like a dream job eventually became the most frustrating tie-in assignment Collins ever landed.

"Often I'm given a good amount of freedom to flesh out characters and backstory and to expand and add dialogue—film scripts being a naturally compressed form," Collins says. "With *Perdition*, I delivered a 100,000-word novel that I was very proud of. But the studio made me cut it to 40,000 words, leaving out anything that wasn't in the screenplay—even though I had created the story. Can

you imagine? I couldn't write dialogue for my own characters."

That's not the case anymore. Not only has Collins written another novel and more comic books about his *Perdition* characters, he'll be in the driver's seat when they return to the screen: He plans to direct the sequel, *Road to Purgatory*, himself. If all goes according to plan, the film will go into production in Iowa in the not-too-distant future.

Collins, you see, isn't just the Novelization King and the Tie-In Czar. He's also the Midwest's busiest—well, maybe, only—movie mogul. He's made several low-budget crime flicks in and around Muscatine, including the 1995 serial killer thriller *Mommy* and its 1997 sequel, *Mommy's Day*. His most recent effort, a performance film documenting his play *Eliot Ness: An Untouchable Life*, was released on home video in September.

So for those of you keeping score at home, here's the tally: Collins's *American Gangster* novelization, *Criminal Minds* tie-in, and straight-to-video *Eliot Ness* movie have all been released in the past three months. Collins also has a new novel, *Deadly Beloved*, coming out from neo-noir specialists Hard Case Crime by the end of the year, while another book from the imprint—Mickey Spillane's *Dead Street* (released last month)—was completed by Collins after "the Mick" passed away. And let's not forget Collins's standalone mystery, *A Killing in Comics*, which hit stores in May. Oh, and he's published two books this year under pseudonyms. *Black Hats*, a whodunit starring an aging Wyatt Earp, was put out under the name Patrick Culhane, while *Antiques Maul* (released in August) was the latest entry in the long-running "Barbara Allan" mystery series Collins cowrites with his wife.

Which all leads to one logical question: How the heck does he do it?!

Collins gets research help from an assistant, Matt Clemens, who occasionally pitches in with plot ideas, as well. But for the most part, it's simply a matter of sitting down and getting the job done.

"I'm a full-time writer, or I should say 'storyteller,' and just work every day, or try to," Collins says. "I do get behind and sometimes things pile up."

Yet the tie-in assignments never stop piling up, too, and that's just the way a workaholic like Collins likes it. His reign as Novelization King might not win him a lot of respect, but he's got plenty of other projects for that. (He's been nominated for the Edgar Award four times and has won the Shamus Award twice.) In the meantime, the tie-ins keep bringing him new readers and racking up big sales.

As a wise man once said, it's good to be the king.



PANIC ON PORTAGE PATH

DICK STODGHILL

The ransom note was delivered to the mansion on Portage Path on the postman's Monday morning round, the first of two on his schedule for the day. The crudely printed address did not contain a name, just the house number, street, and "city." After opening it along with the rest of the mail that had accumulated during their month at Bar Harbor, the residents, Quentin and Roberta Makepiece, were perplexed. The text consisted of letters cut from a magazine and newspaper. The message was concise: "If you pay \$50,000 yor sun will be returned safely."

The Makepieces were in their seventies and their children, two daughters, were grown, married, and living far from Akron. Both had sons who were in their teens. After a hasty but concerned conference, Roberta Makepiece phoned their eldest daughter in Baltimore and then the other in California, forgetting the three hour difference in time. The latter, awakened from a sound sleep, grumpily agreed to check, then returned to the phone to say the two boys were safely in the bedroom they shared. The report from Baltimore had also been reassuring.

"Do you think it's someone's idea of a joke?" Mrs. Makepiece asked her husband.

"Not hardly. I think we had better notify the police."

Having arrived home late Sunday evening, the Makepieces were unaware of the excitement in the affluent neighborhood the previous Friday. On Saturday it had changed to panic, and by Sunday, to despair. Unknowing and unprepared, the response to Quentin's phone call left the elderly couple bewildered and more than a little frightened. Four Akron detectives were at their door within minutes, and close behind were two FBI agents. All doubt was removed that the letter might have been a poor joke.

I was making my rounds at Central Police Station when the call came in. After phoning *Times-Press* city editor Ben Goldsmith to say I was on my way to the west side and someone else would

have to finish my routine checking of police reports, I hurried to where I had parked my 1934 Hupmobile. It was a fine car, an olive green sedan with black fenders and just a little more than fifty-five thousand miles on the odometer. It received rough treatment, though, in my haste to get to Portage Path, where I had spent much of the past three days. Sweat had soaked through my shirt by the time I arrived, and I was hoping that the remainder of August of 1938 would be cooler and less humid than the past week or two.

It had begun with a mass search of the neighborhood for the two-year-old son of a rubber company executive, Frederick Stauffer, and his wife, Joanne. The blond youngster called Bobby had been playing on the front lawn of a sprawling redbrick home directly across from the unoccupied residence of the Makepieces'. His nanny, a large woman in her forties named Prudence Longfellow, said she had a sudden and urgent need to use the bathroom and felt it would be perfectly safe to leave her charge alone for a few minutes. When she returned he was gone.

More than a dozen policemen were soon on the scene and the fruitless search was underway.

Portage Path was part of the route that Indians had followed while portaging their canoes between the Cuyahoga and Tuscarawas rivers. It was a street of stately homes occupied by those who had hit it big in the rubber industry and other lucrative businesses. I couldn't help but wonder if the response would have been the same had it been a child in Kenmore, East Akron, or some other working-class neighborhood.

There had been a possible witness to the kidnapping. The maid at the house to the south of the Stauffers' said she had been looking out a first-floor window when the nanny made her hurried trip inside. Within seconds, the maid said, a brown panel truck had pulled into the Stauffer's driveway, blocking her view of the child. Again, within seconds, the truck had backed out onto the street. The child was nowhere to be seen.

The maid had not noticed the number of the truck's license plate. In a short time she appeared less certain of the truck's color and a little unsure of herself in telling the police that crude white lettering on the panel read JOE'S RADIO SHOP. The wording, she said, was not the work of a professional sign painter and might even have been cut from some sort of material and applied with adhesive.

Although the area within a hundred miles of Akron was canvassed by police, they failed to find a Joe's Radio Shop. The closest was a Joe's Radio Shack in a small town near Mansfield, but

the proprietor did not own a truck and had an airtight alibi for the day of the kidnapping.

A second letter arrived at the Makepiece house the following day. It said the nanny, unaccompanied by the police or anyone else, was to deliver the ransom money in well-circulated, small-denomination bills. She was to walk south along Seiberling Street in East Akron the following night with the money in a satchel. When the contact was made and the money handed over, the child would be given to her. If there was any sign of police in the area the boy would be killed. This note was handwritten by someone more literate than the writer of the first.

The police and FBI agents insisted on a presence in the neighborhood, one which offered little opportunity for concealment. The Stauffers were adamant in their refusal. Their only interest, they insisted, was the return of their son, not the apprehension of the kidnappers. They were emphatic in warning that if their wishes were not respected and anything went wrong they would make sure the resulting publicity reflected poorly on both the Akron police department and the FBI.

And so it was done their way, although the nanny appeared reluctant until reminded that it was her negligence that was responsible for the boy's abduction. An hour after she set out, walking south from East Market Street, a passing motorist saw the nanny lying beside the road. She had been hit on the head, but the wound was superficial. She said a car had pulled up beside her, a man had jumped out, grabbed the satchel, and struck her. It all happened so fast, she said, that she couldn't identify either the man or make, model, or color of the car. Nothing had been seen of the missing child. No one doubted her word.

Then the story died. Slowly at first, then day by day, less mention was made, until finally, two months later, there had been nothing at all for some time. The FBI pulled out, then the Akron police, although both swore the case was on the front burner and would remain so. There had been no new developments, though, and few people expected any would come.

For me it had been a quiet couple of months. The girl of my dreams, Sue Baney, said she was through with me, so there had been no dates with her or anyone else. My social life, if it could be called that, consisted of two Saturday afternoons spent by myself at Old Forge Field watching East High's football team beat Maple Heights 53-0 and Buchtel 52-0. At least life was moving smoothly for the Orientals, although their remaining games might change all that.

Even the police beat had been rather routine, and nothing much was happening in the lives of the other tenants at Mrs. Bauer's

boardinghouse on Dudley Street, the place I called home. Jack Eddy was complaining that the private eye business was too slow for his liking, pudgy Mabel Klosterman had a couple of unmemorable dates with her sometimes boyfriend, the burly and slow-witted Joe Kurtz, and pretty Kitty Bauer seemed to have lost interest in Jack Eddy and now was dating a poor man's imitation of Rudolph Valentino in his role of the sheik.

After three weeks had passed with no mention of the kidnapping in any area newspaper, I drove to Portage Path and talked with Joanne Stauffer. She was low in spirit, discouraged by the lack of results and apparent lack of attention the kidnapping of her son was receiving from law enforcement agencies. That's when I told her about Jack Eddy. For more than a year the assistant manager of the Akron branch of Wellington's National Detective Agency had occupied the room across the hall from mine at the east side boardinghouse.

She was interested. In her opinion there was nothing to lose by hiring a private agency to look into the case, and the Stauffers certainly could afford the cost, whatever it might be. While I was still there she called Jack Eddy and set up an appointment with him at her home for that afternoon.

October had turned suddenly cool and you could feel the creeping up of winter, but I put on a warm sweater and was waiting on the porch when Jack Eddy arrived home half an hour before supper time. As he parked his sleek 1932 Auburn sedan behind my car I went down the steps to meet him. "Are you on the Stauffer case?" I asked.

I wasn't surprised, of course, when he nodded his head before saying, "Thanks for the recommendation, buddy. Guess I owe you a favor." He made it sound like owing me a favor was tantamount to having root-canal surgery.

I knew he had followed the story at the time it was hot news. He never commented on it, at least not to me, but I had seen him shake his head on several occasions after reading one of my stories in the *Times-Press*.

"Think you can do any good?"

"How the hell would I know at this point? The agency certainly can't do any worse than the police and those clowns from the Federal Bureau of Incompetency. It's too bad that Plato Largis was off on vacation in Greece or someplace at the time or the Akron cops might have figured it out."

"He's their best man, granted, but what could he have done that the other detectives didn't?"

"For starters he probably would have seen right away that the

whole setup was phony. Those letters to the house across the street—what a joke they were. Do you honestly think that even the dumbest kidnappers wouldn't have known the right address for the Stauffers? Then there was the time they spent looking for that truck. All they had was the word of the next-door maid that it even existed. She was a loser from the word go, came across as either a complete idiot or a lousy liar. And they checked out the Stauffers' own maid and their cook to see if either had doctored the nanny's lunch to make her have that sudden need to rush to the bathroom. But tell me, what else did they do?"

"They checked out all the delivery people and other workers who came to the house. The yard man, for instance. The gas man, the mailman, those kinds of people."

"You're right, friend, they did all the routine things. The easy, obvious things. When something developed they hurried to investigate, but they were just putting out fires. Nobody was using any imagination."

"Well, the FBI agents—"

"Played like they were Melvin Purvis chasing Dillinger or Pretty Boy Floyd. They tapped a couple of phones and waited for informants to give them a tip. That's what the FBI does best, but when it comes to knocking on doors and doing the legwork, they aren't too enthusiastic. The police should have put Plato Largis in charge as soon as he was back in town. He would have brought a little imagination to the job."

"Taking others off the case and giving it to him wouldn't have been following protocol."

Jack Eddy laughed, repeated "protocol" like it was a four letter word, and gave me a one-knuckle punch that left my right arm feeling paralyzed. After blinking back a few tears, I said, "So what are your plans?"

"Plans? Do you think we're waiting for Christmas or something? We started working on it as soon as I got back to the agency. I've got Cal Andres doing a background check on the maid next door and Cliff Austin doing the same on the nanny."

"The cops have done that, Jack."

"Yeah, sure they did. We look at things from a little different angle, buddy."

He could have said that again and been correct, but I didn't say so. The police were bound by a lot of rules that the Wellington Agency ignored. Sometimes their unorthodox methods produced results because they seldom worried about building a case to take to court. As a result, they were held in respect by citizens, scorned by less efficient cops and feared by criminals who knew the

agency could get rough when someone like Jack Eddy felt it was a good idea.

Jack was a complex man, one I had never been able to figure out. He was excessively ambitious, determined to work his way to the top of Wellington's hierarchy, and he didn't much care how he did it or who got hurt along the way. On the other hand, I had seen him down on a dirty basement floor helping a kid with his Soap Box Derby car. Then, too, a couple of times when he thought I might be in over my head he had showed up unannounced and without a client to foot the bill. And thanks to Jack I had enjoyed the inside track on some good stories. But he could be ruthless when the need arose, as I had witnessed a few times. He stood only five eleven compared to my own six three, and his sandy brown hair was growing thin on top. That and his round Irish face could easily have led someone to think he might be a pushover. The truth was that Jack Eddy was hard as nails. I was always thankful to be on his good side and not someone he was hunting down.

I tapped on the door of his room late the next night. He had missed supper and only arrived home fifteen minutes earlier, obviously weary. "Where do things stand?" I asked.

"On the Stauffer case? Have you ever really looked over the layout there, buddy? The house to the north is quite a distance away and shielded by trees. On the other side of Portage Path the only house or yard with a view of the Stauffers is the Makepiece place, and they were away on vacation. That leaves those in the house to the south or someone in a car on the street as the only possible witnesses to the kidnapping. Traffic is light along there, the man in the next house was at work, and the woman was at a club meeting. The only one there was the maid, and her version of what happened leaves me cold. Cal Andres has found out a few interesting things about her, so maybe by tomorrow I'll have something concrete to tell you. Right now I'm going to hit the hay, so you can hit the road."

At the police station the next morning I sought out Plato Largis. When I walked in the door of his office, he grinned and said, "Bram Geary, ace reporter. What's on your mind, kid?" I was expecting him to explode when he heard that Jack Eddy was poking around in the Stauffer kidnapping. Instead, he sat at his desk, nodding his head as I filled him in. When I was through he said, "He may be right. I'll have your head in a basket if you mention this to anyone else, but I don't think the investigation was handled too well. What he said about imagination, I kind of agree."

I was anxious to find out what progress was being made, so after

completing my afternoon rounds I walked north on Main Street to the Wellington office in the Metropolitan Building. I was there so often the cute, blond elevator operator didn't ask what floor I wanted, just took me up to the fifth. Apparently she thought I was another Wellington operative. I didn't mind, even played the role a little.

I had arrived, it turned out, shortly after Cal Andres had ushered the next-door maid into Jack Eddy's office. Jack came out to tell me so and asked if I wanted to sit in on their interrogation. I did, of course, although it turned out to be a little upsetting.

From the first, I had sized up the maid, Gertrude Slade, as somewhat of a dim bulb. She was a stocky woman in her mid twenties, about five three, with oily-looking black hair and eyes set too close together. She was scared out of her wits, what little she had, and neither Jack nor Cal were doing anything to put her at ease.

Before going back into his office Jack had told me that she had an older sister, Florence. The two had shared a cheap apartment above a store on South Arlington Street, although Gertrude spent most of her nights at the house where she worked on Portage Path. Florence was looked upon as reclusive and aloof in the neighborhood. The interesting part, however, was that she had left the day of the kidnapping and hadn't been seen since.

"The police found that out, Jack. I heard about it before."

"Sure. Of course they did, but they let it drop when Gertrude said her sister just happened to leave on vacation that day. Guess they never got around to checking to see if she came back again. She still hasn't."

Once we were in the office, Jack and Cal gave Gertrude a real grilling. "Where's Florence?" was repeated again and again. After hearing "I don't know" a dozen times, Jack said, "You know taking part in a kidnapping is a capital offense. It's called the Lindbergh Law because it was enacted after the Lindbergh baby was kidnapped, and it can get you strapped in the hot seat down at Columbus. You want to risk that, Gert, or do you want to cooperate?"

The woman was at the point of incoherence, totally confused and unsure of what to do. It was obvious that she knew more than she had ever let on, but just as obvious that she was equally afraid of something or someone else, perhaps sister Florence. When it seemed they weren't going to get anywhere with her, Cal said, "Where are you from, Gertie?"

"Gharkeyville," she replied, then immediately seemed to regret it. "But I haven't been there in years." After thinking about it for a moment more she added, "Neither has Florence."

"How do you know that?" asked Jack Eddy. "You said you didn't

know where she is since she left back in August. Why not Gharkeyville?"

Gertrude was extremely agitated. "No, no, no. She'd never go there. She has to be somewhere else."

"Why wouldn't she go there, Gert? Seems to me like the very place she would go."

She was befuddled, desperate as to what to say next. Finally she croaked, "No, no, no," again. "She can't be in Gharkeyville, so please forget that idea."

Cal Andres looked at Jack and said, "That's where she is. Gharkeyville. No doubt about it, Jack."

Gertrude screamed, "No! No, she isn't! Please, please forget that!"

Even I could tell that Florence was in Gharkeyville. But why did it upset her sister that way? "Because," said Jack Eddy when I asked him later, "she's got the Stauffer kid there."

"You really think so?"

"I'd bet my last dollar on it."

"Where the heck is Gharkeyville?"

"In southwest West Virginia, just a couple of miles from the Kentucky state line. We knew that, by the way, before Cal asked her. Remember that miserable little town of Switchback you went to last spring?"

"How could I forget?"

"Well, from what we've learned, Gharkeyville makes Switchback seem like the Garden of Eden. It's another coal mining town down in Hatfield and McCoy territory. Cal knows a little about it because he grew up in a place like it on the other side of the state line."

"Cal doesn't seem the type. He's so suave and well spoken I'd never have taken him for a hillbilly."

"That's your problem, friend. One of them. You stereotype people, try to fit them into a little niche. Cal has worked hard to become the way he is. Maybe you've never noticed, but he's one hell of an actor. He can play any role you could name, and that's one of the reasons why he's so good at his job. So anyway, have you got any vacation time coming?"

"About five days. Why?" Then the light dawned. "Now wait a minute, Jack . . ."

So we talked about it for a while. "It could be a big story, buddy." Jack said, then a minute later said it again. "Maybe the biggest of your career."

"Not to mention yours. Look, if you think I'm going to spend my vacation time in a place like Gharkeyville—"

"It's up to you, pal. I hear Tom Kennedy at the *Beacon Journal* is

fed up with being scooped on the police beat, so he'd probably jump at the chance to go along."

"You know what you are, Jack? You're an extortionist, an . . . an arm-twister. You have the mind of a criminal."

He laughed and punched me on the chest. "Of course I do. How else could I be so good at my job?"

"It takes one to know one, isn't that what they say?"

"Know your enemy, buddy. Always know your enemy."

"Dammit, Jack, you've got me over a barrel. So when do you leave?"

"First thing tomorrow morning."

I did my best to work it to my advantage. "Look, Ben," I said to my city editor, "it could break the Stauffer kidnapping wide open. You want me to get first crack at the story, don't you?"

Ben Goldsmith leaned back in his chair, either smirking or sneering, I wasn't sure which. "From what little you've told me, it sounds like another one of your wild-geese chases. But I'll tell you what I'll do. If it turns out you're right, then you've been on company time. Only eight hours a day, though, no overtime. If you're wrong, well, you've been on vacation."

It sounded reasonable. Except that bit about one of my wild-geese chases. Just what was he talking about? I wondered.

It didn't make me happy when Jack said we'd go in my car. "The Auburn would draw too much attention in a place like Gharkeyville," he said. "Chances are the people there have never seen one, but they won't notice another old clunker."

He knew that would get under my skin. The Hupmobile was a far cry from an old clunker. One good thing about taking it, though, was that I'd be behind the wheel. I packed a small suitcase in the morning and was out at the car a few seconds ahead of Jack. After tossing his bag on the backseat, he said, "I'll drive."

We headed due south and made good time to Marietta. We ate lunch there at a downtown diner. When we were settled in a booth where no one could overhear, I said, "You've been holding out on me, Jack. There's more to it than you've told me, isn't there? There has to be, or you wouldn't be driving all the way down to Gharkeyville."

He lifted one eyebrow, then gave a careless shrug, as if to say I was wasting his time. "Nothing important, buddy. Cal Andres found a store that sells secondhand stuff near the sisters' apartment. One day the owner had a little yellow sunsuit in the window. Something for a kid about two. He had seen Florence around the neighborhood, but never with a kid, so he was surprised when she came in and bought it. He showed her a few other things he

had for someone that size, and she seemed to enjoy looking over the stuff. Then she suddenly got nervous and hurried out of the place.

"On top of that, Cal saw a woman pushing one of those—what do they call them? Taylor Tots?—with a boy about two in it. He talked to her a while, mentioned Florence, and the woman said she was glad Florence was gone because she scared her."

"Scared her? How?"

"Every time she saw her, Florence made a big fuss over the boy. It got so it was happening so regularly the woman got the idea Florence was lying in wait for her. She felt there was something unnatural about it, and it frightened her."

"Sounds like Florence may have been around the bend."

"You called it for once, buddy. There are women like that, you know. Get obsessed with someone else's kid because they don't have one of their own. There's one more thing. Cal checked the county records and found that Florence had a baby at City Hospital six months after she came to Akron a few years back. It was a boy, stillborn."

And Jack Eddy had said all that was nothing important. Our food arrived and we didn't talk anymore until we finished eating. I thought about what he had told me, of course. I had to agree with that mother, it was kind of scary.

Marietta is a pretty little town on the north bank of the Ohio River, so I wouldn't have minded hanging around for a while. That was out of the question, and we soon were back on the road. Or to be more accurate, a series of them that got progressively worse as we went up, down, and around the precipitous hills that West Virginians call mountains. They might not be the Alps or the Rockies, but driving through them was just as difficult, maybe more so.

After what seemed an eternity we came to a sign telling us we had arrived at Gharkeyville. Like others we had seen along the way, the sign was riddled with bullet holes. I was totally spent, as worn out as if it had been the longest ride of my life. Actually, when I thought about it, it *had* been the longest ride of my life. I had been to Fort Wayne once and Pittsburgh a couple of times, but fell far short of being a world traveler. I had an ominous feeling that that would change in the next few years, thanks to Adolph Hitler. He claimed that after being handed a large chunk of Czechoslovakia he had no further territorial demands in Europe. The amazing thing was that some people actually believed him.

As promised, Gharkeyville was a dismal little town. Tired as I was, though, it looked okay to me. Best of all was finding that it possessed a hotel, or something that passed for one. I was eager to flop down on a bed and was almost, but not quite, ready to pass up Jack Eddy's offer to buy dinner. The diner a couple of doors down the street was as bad, if not worse than, the one in Switchback, where the waitress snarled at customers and the main offering on the menu was a greaseburger. I settled for pork chops, which were a little on the thin side but not too bad, and home fries that had been cremated and were ready for a well-deserved burial.

I awoke refreshed in the morning. For breakfast we found another diner that was a slight cut above the one where we had eaten the previous night. The waitress gave me a quick smile before starting to flirt with Jack. For the umpteenth time I wondered what it was about Jack Eddy that attracted females like fly-paper attracts flies. I was taller, better looking, and had a far more pleasing personality, and yet they completely ignored me when Jack was around.

I was eager to hear what he had planned for us to do but wasn't too thrilled when he gave me my orders. I was to drive to the nearby county seat and check various records at the courthouse, a boring assignment. He was just going to nose around a little to see what he could learn. I had a sneaking suspicion that while I would be poring over musty old records, Jack Eddy would be spending time learning more about that waitress.

Most of the things I found in the records seemed of little importance to me. Florence wasn't married when she left home, or at least hadn't been in that county. She was thirty and her sister Gertrude was twenty-six. The elder Slades also had two sons, Anse, who was thirty-two and R. B., twenty-eight. It appeared that the parents and even a couple of grandparents were still alive and living at the family homestead. Aside from the father and one male grandparent, the only one with a criminal record was Anse. His sheet was as long as my arm.

The tax maps were of some interest. The Slades owned a large tract back in the hills a couple of miles from Gharkeyville. If the map was accurate, the land was on a county road, probably dirt, that ended at their property. Isolated as could be.

Jack Eddy was having lunch at the place where we had eaten breakfast when I arrived back in Gharkeyville. A different waitress was on duty, which made me wonder when the other had clocked out and where Jack had been at the time. I showed him the notes I had made, then asked what he had found out.

"Nothing," he said in a disgusted tone. "These people won't talk to an outsider. I didn't want to come right out and ask about the Slades, but subtlety gets you nowhere down here."

I smirked a little and couldn't help saying, "The great Jack Eddy swaggered to the plate and was called out on three pitches."

I thought he was going to slug me, but he managed to contain himself. After a pause that allowed him to regain his equilibrium, he said, "Cal Andres is on his way. Should be here before midnight. Cliff Austin is with him. If you see either one don't act like you recognize them, just walk on by."

"Both of them coming? You must be expecting a war."

"Cal knows how to talk to people around here, we don't. Cliff is just for backup."

We sat quietly for a few minutes. If we needed backup it did indeed sound like Jack was expecting serious trouble. I had a disquieting thought. "Jack, Anse Slade shot some guy about the time Florence headed up to Akron. Maybe it was the one that got her pregnant. Anyway, the fellow didn't die, so Anse got six months, suspended."

"I'm not sure that shooting someone is a serious offense in these parts."

"Another thing, Jack. A while back I read a book called *Battle Cry* that was set somewhere around here, and it had a couple of characters named Anse. One was Bad Anse. Did you ever hear of anyone named Anse before we came down here?"

Jack leaned his head back and laughed. "God, but you have a way of hitting on the trivial, friend."

I was bored out of my mind until the middle of the next morning when I saw Cal Andres. He was wearing a worn pair of bib overalls, a tattered flannel shirt, and was leaning up against a post on Main Street whittling a stick of wood with a nasty-looking knife. Several other men were nearby doing pretty much the same thing. It seemed to be a major pastime in Gharkeyville. How could people stand to live that way? I wondered. I would have been willing to bet that not a single one of them, Cal excluded, had ever heard of Hitler, let alone Czechoslovakia.

There was a weekly newspaper, though. It ran obits on the front page along with admissions to the hospital at the county seat. Releases, too, of those who hadn't moved over to the obituary column. There were the expected chicken dinner reports from the various towns and villages in the vicinity so you could keep up to date on who visited whom the past week. If you checked closely you could find that some people ate at the expense of their friends five or six nights a week. Also which single males and single females

seemed to always show up at the same house at supper time.

So social activity in the county appeared brisk. Privacy, at least with a large segment of the population, was not sought after, especially at mealtime. The *Gharkeyville Gazette* contained some church news, a few stories concerning coal mines or a store opening or closing, but not a word on national or world events.

I searched in vain for a paper from a larger city. The man behind the counter at a variety store said they received the paper from Charleston but were sold out. "How many copies do you get?"

"Two. One of 'em's reserved for Doc Singletary."

"Then you actually sell one copy?"

"Yup." That ended the conversation.

The news on the radio station at the county seat was more of the same, obits and hospital admissions and releases. Closed in by the surrounding hills, cut off from the outside world, it could have been medieval times rather than 1938. Aside from the decrepit cars and trucks on the street, of course.

Flat caps were part of the uniform for the males of Gharkeyville, although a few broke ranks by wearing battered fedoras that made my old one look pretty good. The youths that weren't wearing flat caps wore those little beanies made from the crown of an old fedora with the bottom turned up and scalloped. The women were nearly all clad in shapeless print housedresses, and most of the young girls wore dresses made from patterned flour sacks, also shapeless. Occasionally I saw an overweight woman, but most of them, like the men, were thin and had drawn, pinched faces. Depression faces, a sign of the times seen everywhere, but more pronounced in Gharkeyville.

It was late evening before we had a council of war in Jack's room at the hotel. Cal Andres did most of the talking. He had wormed his way into the trust of a few people that took him for one of their own. Cal was an enigma. In a suit and tie he could pass for a successful businessman or a rubber company junior executive and was able to mingle at will with those types. In bib overalls and a flat cap he was perfectly at home on the streets of Gharkeyville. He wasn't a big man, no more than five nine, but he worked out at a gym almost daily, so he was wiry and strong as a bull. Before coming to Gharkeyville he had shaved off the slim, Clark Gable-style mustache and mussed up the slicked-back dark hair that gave him the appearance of a Latin romancer. He could stand out in a crowd or lose himself completely in one, whatever suited the occasion. In a sense, he was a human chameleon, an ideal private eye.

"The Slades could be dangerous, Jack," he said. "They run a big still on their property, and the sheriff and the revenuers leave

them alone. They peddle their moonshine over a large area, but from what I heard, most of the buyers pick the stuff up themselves. Nobody came right out and said he was afraid of the Slades, but I could tell that people give them a wide berth, especially Anse. He doesn't run the moonshine business, the father does that, but he's the strongman of the operation. Back home we'd call him an enforcer for the mob. Oh, and one more thing, Anse has a brown panel truck.

"The other son, R. B., is regarded as a pretty nice fellow. As for Florence, she's looked on as a little 'tetched,' as they say down here. Now here's the interesting part: She showed up a couple of months ago with a kid, a boy about two she claims she had while up north. The husband she had married up there had died, or so she told everybody. We know that was a lie. For a week or two she was showing the kid off around town. Since then she hasn't been seen."

Jack Eddy shook his head for a moment, then gave a curt laugh. "I think I get the whole picture now. It's about like we figured, this Florence was nuts to have a kid. One day she was visiting her sister Gertrude on Portage Path and got a look at the Stauffer boy. He was the one, none other would do. It was easy to talk Gertrude into going along with her plan, and she managed to recruit Anse for the job. From the sound of him that wasn't too difficult.

"It worked to perfection until it was Gertrude's time to play her role. She's incredibly stupid, so when she talked to the police about seeing the panel truck she got all flustered, and when asked to describe it she could only remember her brother's truck. It was probably supposed to be black or red, but she said brown. Then she managed to recover enough to tell about the fake lettering. Next she had the job of mailing the ransom letters. I never would have believed it possible, but she was dumb enough to get the wrong address on the envelopes. Florence must have written the second letter and left it with Gertrude to mail later.

"In the meantime, Anse, Florence, and the kid were either back in Gharkeyville or well on their way. None of them are what you would call heavy on the gray matter, and yet they managed to pull off a pretty decent snatch, one they almost got away with. They let Florence run loose with the kid for a couple of weeks, but something happened, and now they've got her tucked away at home. The question is how do we get the boy and Florence away from that mountain hideout and back to Akron. The cops can take care of picking up Anse. And I don't mean the local cops. Whatever, he's none of our concern except for dealing with him when we pick up Florence and the kid."

Cliff Austin said, "It won't be easy, Jack. I used Bram's little sketch and drove up there in Cal's car this afternoon. Man, talk about isolated. The way I see it, we'll have to approach on foot and by going through the woods. There's a Y in the road about half a mile away. We can have Bram park his car there because we'll need one and then give him a signal or a time when he should drive up to the house."

I didn't like the sound of that one bit.

"And we have to remember," said Cal Andres, "that these are hill people. The men will all have guns. That means four of them. Chances are that Anse is the only one that knows Florence's story is phony, so the others will think that *we're* the kidnappers. Like Cliff said, it won't be easy."

Again, Jack Eddy's laugh was curt. "Since when did any of us look for easy jobs?"

If it hadn't been for foolish manly pride, not to mention embarrassment, I would have raised my hand and shouted, "Me!"

The next day was the shortest of my life. The hands on the clock just seemed to whirl around out of control, and all too soon it was evening. We checked out of the hotel, left Cal's car parked along the street leading out of town, then the four of us drove in my car to the dirt road leading to the Slade homestead. As planned, I was to wait at the point where the road forked off to the left; the other three took off on foot. The signal for me to pick them up would be gunfire. That was a comforting thought as I began my lonely vigil.

It was only later that I learned what transpired when they reached the house. Cal Andres did a bit of stealthy window peeping and found the entire family, including the Stauffer boy, gathered in the living room listening to a program on radio. Cal and Jack Eddy moved to the rear of the house, Cliff Austin to the front.

The fun began with Cliff firing two shots in the air. Anse Slade, who was carrying a pistol in his jacket, rushed out the front door as Jack and Cal charged in the back. Cliff leveled Anse Slade with a bullet in the leg. Cal stopped R. B. and the two older men from reaching the rack holding their rifles. Jack swooped up the kid in one arm and Florence in the other. All the women were screaming their heads off.

I came careening up the rutted drive within seconds after Cal and Jack came out of the front door. Everyone piled into my car. Florence was still screaming and trying to put up a fight. As we

roared off back down the drive, someone at the house began firing. I gave the Hupmobile a little more gas when I heard a bullet ping off its back end.

Then we were in the clear. "They'll be after us, Jack," I yelled.

Jack, Cal, and Cliff laughed. "Not until they hike somewhere to get a vehicle," Jack said. "Cliff has the distributor caps off the two back there at the house."

We dropped off Cal and Cliff at the other car, then headed north as fast as the hills would allow. Cal's car, a souped-up 1935 Buick, was close behind. It was tricky enough driving those narrow, winding roads with daylight making the curves and other hazards visible. At night it was tortuous. Jack was in the backseat with Florence. Her right hand was cuffed to the armrest, her left to Jack Eddy. The child was asleep on the seat to his left.

At Jack's orders we didn't take the most direct route, the one we had followed on the way down. Florence began keening as soon as we were on the open road. It was the fearful cry of an agonized banshee. After fifteen minutes of it, Jack stuffed a handkerchief in her mouth.

I breathed a sigh of relief when a little before first light we crossed the Ohio River on the Silver Bridge at Gallipolis. We were still in hilly country, but it wasn't anything like that around Gharkeyville. Near Logan we pulled up at a roadside diner and parked well away from the other cars and pickup trucks. Cal Andres pulled his Buick up beside us, and he and Cliff went inside. A short time later they came back with food for the rest of us. Florence refused to eat, which didn't come as a shock.

In the meantime, I had checked the rear of my car and found a bullet hole in the left fender. Fortunately it was above the level of the tire or anything else of importance. Just seeing it, though, made me even more aware of how easily our adventure could have ended in disaster. With a disabled car, armed men in pursuit, and two miles from town, what would we have done? I didn't even want to think about it.

Jack Eddy made a call from a phone booth on the outskirts of Canton, and half an hour later we saw the Akron city limit sign. I did as ordered and stopped in front of the downtown police station. Cal parked right behind us. Jack and Cal got the handcuffs off Florence, and then Cliff Austin frog-marched her inside. The few people on the sidewalk stood gawking as over and over she screamed, "Give me back my baby!"

Fifteen minutes later we pulled into the Stauffers' driveway. Jack Eddy had called the house from the police station, so both of them were waiting outside for us. Joanne began crying as soon as

she had the boy in her arms. Jack gave her husband a brief summary of what had happened, then we both got a kiss from Joanne before we headed back downtown.

The only way for the *Times-Press* to beat the *Beacon Journal* was to put out an extra. It was a big enough event to warrant one, and my story created a sensation throughout the city. Only it wasn't actually my story. Ben Goldsmith had a rewrite man handle it with me feeding him the details. I was mentioned only as "a *Times-Press* reporter." Goldsmith said, "We're not having another first-person story with you coming out the hero." I didn't really care but was a little put out that I didn't even get to share the byline. Uppermost in my mind was getting home to the boardinghouse and falling into a deep, well-earned sleep.

And thus it ended, or so I thought. Goldsmith had given me the next day off, as he should have, and I decided to spend it doing nothing but loafing around home. The weather had warmed up nicely, so I was relaxing on the front porch swing enjoying the escapades of Perry Mason in the latest Earle Stanley Gardner novel until Mrs. Bauer called me to the telephone. It was Jack Eddy on the line with a curt message, "Get down here, buddy, pronto."

I did, but reluctantly and grudgingly. Ben Goldsmith was my boss, so I didn't mind taking orders from him, but those coming from Jack Eddy were getting a little annoying. I lingered on the elevator at the Metropolitan Building, though, and made a date for the next night with the cute operator.

I was surprised to find Gertrude Slade coming out of Jack Eddy's office. Mac McKelvey was gripping her arm as he escorted her to another room down the hall. "We've had her stashed away next door at the Howe Hotel," Jack told me. "One of our female operatives was in the room with her, and Mac and another man rotated on keeping watch in the hall outside."

Before I could ask why, Cliff Austin came in prodding Prudence Longfellow, the Stauffers' nanny, toward us. She appeared angry, but it was just a facade. In reality you could see she was frightened half out of her mind. Jack wasn't gentle with her. After sitting her down in a chair, he said, "The jig's up, Prude, so let's not waste time. We know all about it, so come clean and have it over with."

She tried to brazen it out, but her voice was quivering as she said, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Have it your way, kiddo." He picked up his phone. After a few seconds he said, "Bring her in."

When half a minute later Gertrude Slade was brought into the room, Prudence Longfellow blanched and gave a little gasp. "It's

all over, Prude," said Jack, "so let's hear it in your own words."

Prudence knew he was right as soon as she saw Gertrude, the erstwhile next-door maid. She began crying. In a teary, choked-up voice she began, "I was coerced into going along with it by that horrible woman."

"Florence Slade?"

She nodded her head, wiped away the tears on her cheeks, blew her nose, and continued, "She found out about something in my past. I'm not going to tell you what it was, but she said if I didn't help them she would tell the Stauffers and then see that I never got another job."

The gist of the matter was that Prudence had just handed the boy to Gertrude and then hurried into the house, pretending she had to use the bathroom, making sure the Stauffers' maid saw her. Gertrude in turn said that she gave the child to Florence, who had been waiting. Anse Slade was there as well. He and Florence drove away in his car with the boy on Florence's lap. They headed straight for Gharkeyville.

"And it was Anse who took the money from you on Seiberling Street, then gave you a light tap on the head," Jack Eddy said to Prudence. "You were lucky he didn't kill you so they wouldn't have had to split the ransom with you."

Prudence nodded her head. "I only got a third of the ransom. How did you find out about it?"

"I did some checking on you," said Cliff Austin. "The first thing that seemed odd was that you moved into a more expensive apartment even though you were out of a job for the time being. When I found out you had bought a used car, that was the clincher in my book. I dug a little deeper and learned what it was that Florence held over your head to make you cooperate. It wasn't that big a deal, lady. You should have told her to get lost."

So now it really was all over. It gave me another good story, of course, but I was sick of the whole affair. The four participants were headed for lengthy stays in Federal prisons, but someone else could handle those stories.

My date with the elevator operator, Gail Robinson, didn't turn out too good. She was cute as could be, pleasant too, but she didn't have much upstairs except the blond curls on top of her head. To say the conversation lagged at times would be an understatement.

My heart, I had to admit to myself, belonged to my old girlfriend, Sue Baney. For months now she wouldn't talk to me, just banged down the phone as soon as she heard my voice until I quit even trying to call. It was Jack Eddy's fault, or so it seemed to me,

because Sue had given up on me when I had tagged along on another of his cases that involved shooting. She didn't want a dead boyfriend, she said. I had to laugh ruefully when I thought of what she would say if she knew that now my car sported a bullet hole.

I wanted to forget the Stauffer-Slade case, but it keep popping up in my mind. So many lives ruined, so much worry and despair, all because a mentally unstable woman was fixated on having a child to replace her own that was stillborn. And not just any child, only the Stauffer boy would do. I took up my old habit of walking the streets of East Akron at night. I was looking for answers, I suppose, but didn't find any along the empty streets or by staring at the same old displays in the windows of locked stores. The world wasn't a pretty place, but it was foolish of me to think I could do anything to make it better. Even so I wanted to.

I was surprised when I walked into Kippy's at lunchtime one day and saw Sue Baney seated at the counter. I was even more surprised a few minutes later when she came over and stood by my stool. I looked around, opened my mouth, but found I was tongue-tied. Sue hesitated a moment, then cleared her throat before saying, "I just want to say that it was heroic of you to do what you did in rescuing that kidnapped little boy, Bram."

I cleared my throat, too, and croaked, "You read about it in the paper?"

"Yes, and Jack Eddy called me to elaborate on the part you played. He said you were the key to the success of the whole operation."

That was so like him: Jack Eddy didn't hesitate to involve me in something that might easily get me killed and then turn around and make it seem that I was the hero. And to phone my estranged girlfriend in hope of getting us back together.

Sue turned and walked toward the door, then looked back and said, "Call me sometime . . . if you feel like it."

My heart leaped up to my throat. I watched her walk away, admiring her trim little body and the swaying of her hips. When she was gone I checked my watch. It was going on one o'clock, so I would have to wait six more hours before picking up the phone. ♀

NUMSKULDUGGERY

JOHN H. DIRCKX

"I told you we should ask the guard at the desk for directions."
"It's got to be right around this next turn."

Jim and Judy Jenclaire's footfalls echoed wetly in the deserted corridors on the tenth floor of the Bossart Tower. To the right and left, as they pursued their quest, they passed a long succession of office doors showing darkened glass. Around the last turning, which brought them almost back to their starting point at the elevators, they saw one frosted glass door standing ajar with lights still aglow behind it.

"That's it. Ten eighteen."

Fully accustomed to Jim's habit of stating the obvious at every opportunity, Judy followed him without comment into the reception area of Canavalt Industries. They wiped their still-sleety shoes on the mat and peered inquiringly around the deserted office. A counter separated them from a work area occupied by two desks, beyond which two doors evidently gave access to private offices. Except for the faint hum of the fluorescent lights, the place was as silent as a burial vault at midnight.

"Anybody here?" called Judy. "Hello?"

"Probably in one of the inner offices," said Jim. "Might as well sit down and wait."

"Do you smell something burning?"

"Mmm. Probably a cigarette. It figures. No ashtrays out here, Thank You For Not Smoking sign . . ."

They waited for five minutes, and another five, during which Judy repeatedly bounced up out of her chair, craned her neck around the office, called "Hello?" and sat down again.

"Could be stuck on the phone," said Jim. "He said he'd be here till five thirty. And that's probably his coat folded up on the desk. He wouldn't leave without— What are you doing?"

"Trying to read the Quote of the Day on that message board. It starts out 'A man who plants his garden . . .' but I can't see the rest of it around that cabinet."

Jim stood up and leaned across the counter to see if he could

make out the conclusion of the saying, then abruptly recoiled and staggered back to his chair.

"What's the matter?"

"There's a guy lying right there on the floor, on the other side of the counter."

"What's he doing?"

"Nothing. I think he's dead."

"Then why are we whispering?" She was already groping for her wireless phone.

If it hadn't been for the filthy weather, Detective Sergeant Cyrus Auburn would probably have walked the five blocks from headquarters to the Bossart Tower instead of joining the downtown rush hour traffic. After circling the building twice in a haze of fog and freezing rain, he gave up the search for a parking place on the street and pulled into a parking garage.

It was five minutes to six when he sloshed through the revolving door into the main lobby of the Bossart Tower. At the security desk Nick Stamaty, the investigator from the coroner's office, was awkwardly juggling his field kit and camera case while showing identification to a uniformed guard. Auburn flashed his badge and joined Stamaty in the elevator for the ride to the tenth floor.

"You guys got anything on him in Records?" asked Stamaty.

"No, but I understand this is the same Canavalt who's always in trouble with the Feds and the newspapers because of his toxic landfills."

"Right." Stamaty shifted his burdens and shook moisture from his coat sleeves. "He was going to run for state senator till some citizens' group skewered him."

"Sounds like somebody skewered him for good this time with some hot lead."

They stepped out into the tenth floor lobby to find Patrolman Jake Schottel chatting with a couple in their thirties who were sitting on a bench opposite the elevator. Schottel came to attention briefly, pointed along the corridor to their right, and resumed his chatting.

"I see Kestrel's already here," Stamaty muttered, as they approached the offices of Canavalt Industries. "Nobody hangs yellow tape like our boy."

Sergeant Kestrel, the police evidence technician, was working with camera and tape measure behind the counter. He favored them with a hostile scowl, such as a bank teller might throw at a gaggle of befuddled senior citizens joining the queue at his win-

dow two minutes before closing time. Instead of greeting them, he barked out the monosyllable "Fritz" and went on with his work.

Patrolman Dollinger appeared immediately from an inner office. He made a careful detour around something that lay on the floor out of sight behind the counter, opened a low gate, and held it open for Stamaty to pass through.

"I'm not finished in here," said Kestrel. They all ignored him.

Auburn leaned over the counter without touching anything to view the remains of B. J. Canavalt. The deceased, a heavily built man in his fifties, lay flat on his back staring at the ceiling with unseeing eyes. A round hole, nearly black under the fluorescent lights, gaped in the front of his shirt.

"Weapon?" asked Auburn.

"Not here," said Dollinger.

Stamaty moved to a remote corner of the office and put down his equipment. "What about next of kin?" he asked.

"Wife," said Dollinger. "She's been and gone already. Their apartment is right around the corner in the Underwood."

"Any sign of robbery or damage here?" asked Auburn.

"Not so far. That's his wallet on the desk, with forty-four dollars in it. His wife checked the petty cash drawer in that office I just came out of. It hasn't been touched. Are those people still waiting outside by the elevator?"

"Are they the ones who found the body?"

"A Mr. and Mrs. Jenclaire. They had an appointment with Canavalt after regular office hours. Walked in and found him dead."

"Office staff?" asked Auburn.

"There's a business manager, name of Simms," said Dollinger. "The dead man's wife says he would have left around five. We tried to reach him at his home phone but got no answer. Possibly still in transit when we called. The wife works here as a secretary when she's needed, but she hadn't been in the office since one day last week—till Schottel brought her in today."

Before leaving the office to interview the Jenclaires, Auburn took a good look around to fix the general topography and relevant details firmly in his mind. Although Kestrel and Stamaty would both make precise drawings of the scene and take numerous photographs, two-dimensional records were no substitute for a clear mental picture of the solid reality.

The main office measured about five yards by six, from which the waiting area outside the counter subtracted a small space less than six feet square. Behind the counter were two large steel desks, one of them in front of a window facing out on the wet

blackness of a winter's evening and the other set against the wall opposite the window. The usual array of file cabinets, utility cabinets, and credenzas ran around the perimeter of the space. The desk at the window was equipped with a computer, the other with thick looseleaf binders and a shelf of reference books.

When Auburn returned to the tenth floor lobby, Patrolman Schottel moved away from the Jenclaires to pace the pattern in the floor tiles in front of the elevators.

"Thanks for waiting, folks." Auburn took out a three-by-five-inch index card and a pen. "Can I get the exact spelling of your name and your home address and phone?"

"We gave all that to the man who took our fingerprints," said Judy Jenclaire, who was wearing gaudy jewelry and nail polish the color of bubblegum. Her husband, in horn-rimmed glasses and a plaid raincoat with matching hat, stood silently by with a general air of stodgy self-satisfaction.

All in all, thought Auburn, the prototypical Mr. and Mrs. Dweeb. They had obviously gotten over their initial shock, if any, at finding a homicide victim.

"About what time did you get here?" he asked.

They looked at each other and agreed on five fifteen P.M. "We both work downtown," said Jenclaire, "and I couldn't get off till five. We decided to meet downstairs in the lobby and come up together."

"Did you have an appointment?"

"Yes. Well, anyway, when I called he said he'd be here till about five thirty."

"What was the nature of your business with Mr. Canavalt?"

Jenclaire cleared his throat and squared his shoulders while he collected his thoughts. "Judy's father died about six months ago, and we're trying to settle his estate without paying a lot of legal fees. He had a construction business and there's about a ton of salvaged brass and copper in one of his sheds. We've been checking around to see what kind of a market there might be for it."

"Had you done business with Canavalt before?"

"No, sir. Just found him in the phone book."

"Did you come up on one of these elevators?"

"The middle one."

"Did you see anybody here on this floor—in the halls or in the office?"

"Not a soul. We walked the long way around by mistake. All the other offices were dark."

"We didn't even see *him*," added Judy with a shiver, "till we'd sat

there on the other side of the counter from him for ten or fifteen minutes."

Heavy footfalls announced Dollinger's approach. "See you a minute, Sergeant?"

He waited till Auburn had accompanied him almost all the way back to the office before he broke the news in an undertone that wouldn't carry down the corridor. "Sergeant Kestrel found the weapon."

Kestrel, silently aglow with pride in his achievement, was examining a snub-nosed .32 caliber Smith and Wesson revolver under a powerful inspection light. "Recently fired, one round gone," he said, as if talking to himself. "No prints."

"Where was it?"

"Bottom drawer of that desk. Wrapped up in this. Don't touch." He pointed with a gloved finger to a steel blue uniform jacket draped over the desk near the window. Next to it lay a flat cap with a black plastic visor. The jacket bore no insignia or name tag. "Holster?"

Kestrel was so absorbed that he didn't bother to answer. Auburn left him to his work and went back to the Jenclaires.

"Hey, Officer," said Jim, "if you don't need us for anything else could we maybe go get some dinner?"

"Sure, in a minute. Did you see any uniformed security guards in the building this afternoon?"

"One, downstairs at the desk," said Judy.

"How would you describe him?"

They consulted together and came up with a composite portrait: male, African American, skin color a little lighter than Auburn's, age forty to forty-five, medium height and build, short hair, maybe a little gray on the sides. This sounded to Auburn like a pretty fair description of the security officer, Hicks by name, whom he and Stamaty had seen in the main lobby on their way in. Auburn sent the Jenclaires off to dinner and went back to Canavalt's office just as Schottel and Dollinger left on a call.

After getting clearance from Kestrel, Auburn made a careful search of the premises for an appointment book or calendar. One of the inner offices was Canavalt's private sanctum and the other served as a storeroom. Next to the phone on Canavalt's desk lay a memo slip on which the Jenclaires' name, without the *i*, had been scrawled along with the succinct notation, "copper brass 5:15." He found no appointment book.

Stamaty and Kestrel were working around each other with the wary moves of two sharks that can't make up their minds whether to avoid an encounter or try for a kill. Auburn told them he was

going downstairs to talk to the guard at the desk, but he wasn't sure either of them heard him.

He found a different guard on duty in the main lobby now, a young skinhead whose name tag read "Golnicky."

"Hicks is at dinner," Golnicky informed him. "He'll be back at seven."

"Anybody else but you two on duty tonight?"

"No, sir, just me and him from four to midnight."

Auburn was studying Golnicky's uniform. It consisted of a white shirt, narrow black tie, black slacks, and a gray jacket with patches on the shoulders identifying the Spahn Agency. "What caliber side arm is that?"

"Thirty-two."

"Is there any way you could leave here for a few minutes—come upstairs with me and take a look at something?"

"Yes, sir. It's about time for me to make my rounds anyway." He led Auburn to one of two elevators that were standing open and put a key into a slot in the control panel before punching the knob for the tenth floor. "Did they really shoot this guy right here in the building?"

"That's the way it looks. Did you know him?"

"Just to see him coming through every day. What time did he get shot?"

"We don't know that yet. Did you hear anything?"

"Like a shot? You wouldn't. Not in this place."

When they got to the office, Golnicky had a hard time keeping his eyes off the corpse long enough to examine the uniform jacket and cap. "That's not one of ours," he said, holding the sleeve of his own jacket out for comparison. He took off his cap and showed Auburn that the detailing and the maker's name were different.

"Can you get from here to the Underwood Apartments without going outside?" asked Auburn.

"No, sir, you'd have to go out the main entrance, hang a left along the street to DeWire, and then another left."

Stamaty put down his camera and made a notation on a clipboard. "Cy, if you're going to see the wife we might as well go together. Can you wait while I bag his hands?"

After enclosing the dead man's hands in plastic bags, Stamaty stripped off his gloves, picked up his raincoat, and tucked a fat notebook into an inside pocket. They left Kestrel in charge.

Three minutes' travel in the wind and sleet had them dripping and gasping by the time they arrived at the Canavalt's apartment. Auburn's ring was answered by Mrs. Canavalt herself, a thin

woman in her fifties whose hair, with the rich ivory color of gold turning to silver, swirled in disarray around her shoulders. Her features looked haggard and worn despite a freshly applied layer of makeup, including lipstick the color of a cut rose that is due to be thrown out.

He introduced himself and Stamaty and expressed sympathy and regret that they had to question her while her grief was still fresh. She nodded her understanding and invited them to leave their coats in the entrance hall before conducting them to the living room. She was evidently in a state of shock, her responses automatic.

The apartment had been lavishly but tastefully decorated by professionals, with lots of gold tissue and blond wood. It displayed the dreary harmony and order of a dwelling place inhabited by middle-aged people without children or grandchildren. In one of the plush chairs sat a distinguished-looking man with a shot glass half full of pale amber liquid at his elbow.

"Mr. Portman is our lawyer," explained Mrs. Canavalt. "I called him as soon as I got back from the office."

Barry Portman acknowledged their greetings with a lordly nod but made no move to get up. "You can direct any questions you have to me," he said. "I'm an old friend of the family, and I'll be helping Henrietta with any arrangements that need to be made."

Although Auburn had once aspired to a legal career himself, his decision to go instead into law enforcement had engendered a gradually strengthening antipathy to lawyers in general and pompous oafs like this one in particular. Disregarding the opening Portman had just given him, he addressed his questions to Mrs. Canavalt.

"I know you've already made a statement," he said, "but we'd like you to go over everything just once more. Could you tell us what happened this afternoon, as you experienced it?"

"As I experienced it? Why, all I know is that a policeman suddenly appeared on my doorstep and said that B. J. had been killed and would I come and identify the body?"

Auburn hoped Officer Schottel hadn't acted quite so callously as she made it sound. "When was the last time you saw your husband or talked to him?"

"This morning, a little before nine, when he left for the office."

"We don't know yet just what happened, but most homicides are committed by people known to their victims." Out of the corner of his eye, Auburn could see the lawyer glowering bleakly at him, ready to intervene if he overstepped the bounds of propriety. "Can you think of anyone who might have wanted to kill your husband?"

"Dozens," she said with a wry smirk. "I'm sure you read the papers. They've been screaming for his—his blood for months."

"Do you know of any personal enemies? Anyone who had a particular grudge against your husband, or who'd made threats against his life?"

"No. But B. J. wouldn't have talked about things like that to me. I'm afraid he never took me very seriously."

"How can you say that, Henrietta?" objected Portman. "You were his whole life, and you know it."

"Oh sure, his bird in a gilded cage." She swept heavily bejeweled hands in a broad arc to take in the sumptuous decor around her. "But when I helped him at the office he wouldn't even let me turn on a computer because Simms might not like it."

"That's because Simms has been running the business for him for years. B. J. always knew where the money was, but he never had the patience to stop and count it."

"We're interested in reaching Mr. Simms as soon as possible," said Auburn.

"He's at home," said Mrs. Canavalt. "I just talked to him a couple of minutes ago. He and I never got along very well, but somebody had to tell him what happened. He said he left work early this afternoon because he had a dental appointment." Auburn checked with her to be sure he had Simms's correct phone number.

He and Stamaty obtained answers to a few more routine questions, and Stamaty exchanged cards with Portman as they discussed procedures for the release of the body by the coroner after the mandatory autopsy had been completed. Then they went back through the bitter, blustery night to the Bossart Tower. Hicks, the guard they'd seen on their first arrival, was now on duty again at the security desk near the elevators.

Auburn stayed in the lobby to interview Hicks while Stamaty went back up to the homicide scene. Hicks hadn't seen any stranger wearing a guard's uniform in the building that afternoon. He hadn't heard anything that could have been a gunshot.

Apparently the three shifts of guards at the Bossart Tower served a largely cosmetic function. Security was mainly concentrated on the luxury apartments that occupied the eleventh to the sixteenth floors. The elevators would open on those levels only in response to keys held by tenants. Other levels were open to the public not only from the elevators but also from either of two stairwells. In addition, the mezzanine, which housed Hartline Savings and Trust, was accessible day and night from the parking garage next door. A visitor to the building who, like Auburn, had parked in the garage could take an elevator from the mezzanine

to the tenth floor and then leave the building by retracing that route without ever passing through the lobby.

Deciding that he would only be in the way if he returned to Canavalt's office, Auburn took an elevator up one floor from the lobby to the mezzanine level so as to get back to his car without further exposure to the elements. His way led him past the entrance to the bank, now closed for the day except for two automatic teller machines projecting into the hall, and along a suspended walk that traversed a floodlit forest of imitation tropical foliage.

Before leaving the garage he called Simms and arranged to meet him at his home at eight P.M. That left him about forty minutes to grab some dinner at a fast-food mill along the way.

Simms occupied a townhouse in the Phoenix District, not far from downtown. The man who answered Auburn's ring looked considerably older than he'd expected, and his speech was slurred, as if his tongue had turned to leather. "I'm not drunk," he assured Auburn. "I spent an hour at the dentist's this afternoon, and the local hasn't worn off yet."

He welcomed Auburn to his bachelor lodgings with stiff cordiality. His manner betrayed no emotional response whatsoever to the recent murder of his employer, but then Auburn suspected that he was a pretty cold fish by nature. His living room possessed all the comfort and charm of the customer waiting area at a transmission shop.

"What time was your dental appointment?" Auburn asked when they were settled in leather armchairs wreathed in dust.

"Three thirty. I left work around three. My dentist's office is just up the street here in the Phoenix Medical Building. He found something cracked, so I didn't get out of there until almost five."

"And came on home here from the dentist's?"

"Yes. B. J. knew I wouldn't be coming back after my appointment. He didn't make me punch a time clock."

"How long had you been working for him?"

Simms's eyes blinked once before he generated an answer. "Eleven years and five months."

"Were you aware that he was expecting any visitors at the office this afternoon?"

"No, but then I wasn't his secretary. My job is to keep the books, bill the customers, pay subcontractors and vendors and Uncle Sam, and watch the cash flow. B. J. did his own marketing and made his own appointments."

"Was it unusual for him to be at the office after five?"

"Not really."

"Who knew you wouldn't be there after three o'clock today?"

"Just B. J. and the people at the dentist's office."

"Are you aware of any personal or political enemies who might have been motivated to kill him?"

"No, but there again I didn't know all that much about his personal life or his political activities—except what I read in the papers."

"Is there anything in the office that somebody might want to steal?"

"Just a little petty cash. Mrs. Canavalt said that hadn't been touched when she called."

"I understand she works at the office sometimes."

"As I said, I don't do secretary work. Sometimes she helped B. J. when he got behind in his correspondence. He wasn't one to spend money on temporary help when he could get somebody to work for him for nothing."

After leaving Simms, Auburn phoned in to headquarters to report on his activities and find out whether there were any fresh developments in the case. There weren't. He filed requests for records searches and background probes on the Jenclaires, Simms, the Canavalts, and their lawyer Portman, who seemed to be on pretty chummy terms with the newly widowed Henrietta.

The weather next morning was as bleak as ever. The sleet had stopped, but roads and sidewalks now lay under a treacherous glaze of ice. The mournful howl of sirens was heard downtown at intervals of a half hour or so all through the day.

Stamaty had e-mailed a preliminary autopsy report on Canavalt. Death had been due to a single gunshot fired at almost point-blank range from a .32 caliber handgun. The bullet had passed completely through the left ventricle of the heart, causing massive and instantly fatal hemorrhage. Both the bullet and the weapon found at the scene were currently under study at the regional ballistics laboratory. The forensic pathologist had tentatively set the time of death at four thirty P.M. Drug and toxicology studies were pending.

Somebody in Records had done an excellent job of assembling a dossier on Benjamin John Canavalt, age fifty-seven. Most of the material had apparently come from Internet sites featuring old newspaper articles. Canavalt had started in the waste disposal and salvage business in the early 1970s with a little capital and a lot of gall. In that era of rampant ecologic hysteria, he had opened a chain of so-called recycling centers, which were quite simply salvage operations that paid out absolutely nothing for the rich har-

vest of lead, copper, aluminum, and scrap iron that a gullible public brought their way.

Later, Canavalt had branched out into toxic waste transport and disposal, activities that eventually brought him into conflict with the very activists to whom he owed his early success. His landfills and incinerators had aroused the anger and indignation of citizens' groups that claimed that his methods of handling lead, mercury, PCBs, asbestos, Freon, and fiberglass resins were actually returning those pollutants to the environment instead of removing them.

Canavalt's most flagrant offense to date had been his manner of recycling petroleum-contaminated soil in open fields, which involved repeated disking and tilling. This venting of the soil was supposed to lead to volatilization and biodegradation of petroleum residues, but a vocal minority claimed that, to the contrary, it resulted in irreversible contamination of the underlying aquifer.

During the past three years Canavalt had begun dabbling in local politics and had evidently garnered enough party support to run for state senator in the next election, with Barry Portman as his campaign chairman. His candidacy had been vehemently opposed by environmental activists, and in particular an arch-conservative organization called the Coalition for Peaceful Renewal. The moving spirit behind CPR was Luke Grantley, a retired high school basketball coach and the recently elected president of the county Board of Education.

Records reviews on the Jenclaires had turned up nothing of interest. She was a clerk at a clock and camera shop, and he worked as a draftsman for an engineering firm. E. Bartlett Simms, fifty-two, had a degree in accounting and finance. Before joining Canavalt Industries, he had managed the local branch of a public income tax preparation agency. The law firm to which Barry Portman, Esq., belonged specialized in divorce, child custody, and adoption cases. Portman was fifty-seven and unmarried, a past president of the local bar association, and currently chairman of its ethics committee. Henrietta Canavalt, née Speedwell had taught school before, and for a short time after, she married B. J.

Auburn was digesting all these pieces of information and merging them into a single file when he got a call from the desk downstairs announcing the unexpected arrival of Barry Portman. Moments later the lawyer swept in, set his briefcase on the floor, slipped off his coat, and settled into a chair as if he were in his own office and Auburn were the visitor.

Then fixing Auburn with what he probably thought was a mesmeric gaze, he opened the briefcase and withdrew a mahila envelope.

"You won't want to touch these until your lab people have gone over them," was his opening remark. "I'm sorry to say I already did touch two of them before it occurred to me that they might be evidence."

"What is this exactly?" asked Auburn, taking the envelope from him but making no move to open it.

"You can judge that for yourself. Henrietta Canavalt and I were going through B. J.'s personal papers at his office this morning and I came across a group of five letters he'd apparently received within the past two or three months. I'm assuming they're that recent because they refer to his candidacy for the state senate."

Auburn turned back the flap of the envelope and allowed the letters to slide out on his desk without touching them. He used a pencil eraser to spread them out for examination. There were five of them in all, each consisting of two or three pages, computer-printed, single-spaced, on one side of letter-sized sheets of plain white paper. They were undated. All were addressed to B. J. Canavalt and all bore the computer-printed signature "Ira Ventura."

"Envelopes?" asked Auburn.

"We couldn't find them."

"Do you know who Ventura is?"

"No, and he's not in the phone book, or the city directory either."

Auburn scanned the letters, reading enough of each to get the general flavor. The language was flamboyant and rhetorical, sprinkled with French and Latin quotations, erupting occasionally into bombast. The writer accused Canavalt of lying, cheating, manipulating public officials, and engaging in a morally objectionable business operation while posing as a public benefactor. The ostensible purpose of all the letters was to dissuade him from running for public office. Two of them contained more or less explicit death threats.

"Had Canavalt mentioned these letters to his wife?" asked Auburn.

"No. But, as she told you last evening, he kept things like this to himself."

"He hadn't mentioned them to you either?"

"No, certainly not."

"I understand you were managing his campaign for state senate."

"That was still highly tentative. The elections are almost a year away, and he hadn't even been nominated yet."

Auburn leaned to one side so that the light struck the sheets obliquely. "I can make out the impressions of numbers on some of

these pages," he said. "Apparently, somebody wrote on something that was lying on top of them. Was that you?"

"No, I'm sure it wasn't," replied Portman after a moment's reflection.

"Can we keep these?"

"Of course. That's why I brought them to you."

Auburn gave him a receipt for the letters. "Would we have a set of your fingerprints on file?"

"You should. Taken a few years ago when I was bonded as trustee for a legal aid society. By the way, when Henrietta and I went up to the office this morning we found Simms slogging away at his computer exactly as if nothing had happened. But that figures. B. J. used to say Simms was the grand national chairman of the Society for the Prevention of Change."

"What's Simms's status legally now, do you know?"

"I certainly do know." Portman stood up and picked up his coat. "B. J. never incorporated his business. He was sole proprietor, and by the terms of his will the whole thing passes to Henrietta. She's keeping Simms on for the time being, but I've advised her to sell the business. Without a feisty fire-eater like B. J. behind it, it'll go down in a couple of years, and then she won't be able to give it away."

"There's something I didn't want to ask you yesterday in front of Mrs. Canavalt," said Auburn. "What are the chances that Canavalt was involved in some romantic entanglement?"

"You're thinking jealous husband?" Portman finished buttoning his coat. "Forget it. B. J. had his failings, but that wasn't one of them."

After the lawyer had left, Auburn made a note of all the numbers he could discern on any of the letters. Once he turned them over to the forensics lab, he'd have only photocopies to work with, and he doubted that the impressions of the numbers would show up in the copies.

Up in the lab, Sergeant Kestrel accepted the envelope from him as if it were the original manuscript of *The Divine Comedy* and made a grand rigmarole out of recording the circumstances under which it had come into Auburn's possession. Then he laid the sheets out in a precise row on a laboratory bench as clean as the counter in a hospital kitchen.

"Any way of tracing the paper?" asked Auburn.

"I doubt it. There's no watermark. This is just cheap twenty-pound writing paper, like you can buy anywhere. Not really the best choice for a computer or photocopier."

He proceeded to survey the letters under a blinding light. "Were

you thinking these might be in some kind of cipher?" he asked finally.

"No, not at all," said Auburn, fighting an impulse to smile. "I think they're just what they seem to be—crank letters, with a little homicidal menace thrown in. And now that the homicide has actually taken place . . . Could you get a set of photocopies down to me yet this morning?"

Auburn heard his name called on the public address system and used his cell phone to answer the page.

"Sergeant, are you free to see a walk-in about the Canavalt case?"

"Did you get a name?"

"A Mr. Grantley."

"Send him up to Room K."

Unlike the Bossart Tower, headquarters had only one elevator. Instead of waiting for it to come to the top floor, Auburn took the back stairs so as to arrive at the waiting area on his level before Luke Grantley got there.

Ever since becoming president of the Board of Education, Grantley had been embroiled in one controversy after another. His appearance was therefore fully familiar to TV news watchers and newspaper subscribers. Big and bony, he had a broken nose and a broad shock of silvery hair that lay obliquely athwart his brow like the collapsed tin roof of an abandoned house. Auburn met him at the elevator and led him to his office.

"Thanks for seeing me without an appointment, Officer," said Grantley. Once in the office, he unbuttoned his windbreaker and eased himself slowly down into the chair Portman had lately vacated with something between a sigh and a groan. "I just got back from out of town late last night and didn't know about B. J. until I saw the news this morning. It upset me so much I canceled a whole day of meetings."

Auburn sat down behind his desk. "According to the papers," he said, "you and Canavalt were bitter political opponents."

"Not bitter. And I'm no politician." He said it in the same way a used car salesman might tell a whopping lie about a faulty ignition system, and it came across just about as convincingly. "Sure, we differed pretty sharply on some matters of principle. But, as the saying goes, a man who has no enemies can win no battles."

"Were you and he personally acquainted?"

"We used to be pretty close when I was coaching because B. J. donated a lot of money for uniforms and equipment."

"How long has it been since you saw him or talked to him? Or wrote to him?"

"Oh, months. Maybe a couple years. After he started that poison

farm of his down in the southern part of the county, where he was dumping tons of petroleum residue right into the regional water supply, we came to a parting of ways. I just want you to know, though, that I deplore this murder and the spite and lawlessness behind it. And that whoever shot B. J., it wasn't me."

"We haven't—"

"Because, let's face it, I've got to be on your list of suspects. But, hey, I've always been a guy that believes in working through the system. I saw enough violence when I was growing up in Jersey to know that it creates ten times more problems than it solves. And anyway, like I said, I was in Baltimore the past couple days with a whole flock of people from the school board." Again that mendacious tone and the smirk that went with it, challenging Auburn to doubt the alibi Grantley had just given himself. "And if there's any way I can help you find out who did this, please feel free to call on me. I'll even put the whole resources of my organization, CPR, at your disposal if it'll help."

Grantley hauled his huge frame erect with more groaning. "What are you, about thirty-five?" he asked.

"Plus one."

"Well, let me tell you something: After fifty, everything is a compromise. And weather like this plays hell with joints you didn't even know you had. And spending two and a half hours on a bus doesn't help either."

Just after Grantley left, a messenger brought Auburn photocopies of the five letters from upstairs. He spent ten minutes with various directories in a futile search for Ira Ventura and then took the copies with him to lunch in the canteen. Over chicken giblets and rice he read slowly and carefully through each letter.

There didn't seem to be much doubt that all five of them had been written by the same hand. The style reminded Auburn of some newspaper editorials—smug, puritanical, and imperious. "You are a simpleton if you think the citizens of this district are going to elect you to public office with your record of dissimulation and chicanery, for once a man in your position has forfeited his bona fides, they can never be reestablished," read one. "If you persist in your presumptuous pursuit of a seat in the state legislature, your execrable person will infallibly become the corpus delicti in a murder case," read another.

Something didn't jibe here, but Auburn couldn't quite put a finger on it. The stuffy manner, the pretentious choice of words, the stilted phrasing all seemed unnatural, something like prose manufactured by a computer. Canavalt evidently hadn't taken the threats very seriously, yet he had kept the letters. Was it possible

that, as Kestrel had suggested, the words printed on the pages concealed some kind of cipher messages?

After lunch Auburn met with his immediate supervisor, Lieutenant Savage, to review progress on the case.

"No powder residue on the victim's hands?" asked Savage.

"No, sir. But the gunshot was instantly fatal, and he wouldn't have had time to put the gun away in the drawer . . ."

"I know. Just trying to get the full picture. What do we know about this uniform that was found at the scene?"

"Nothing so far. Kestrel's still checking on it. Nothing on the weapon yet, either, except that there weren't any latent prints."

"So what have we got? Somebody walks into Canavalt's office wearing a guard's uniform and probably gloves, whips out a revolver, and shoots him at point-blank range through the heart. Why did the killer leave the uniform and the weapon behind in the office?"

"I'm assuming he left the uniform there, wrapped around the murder weapon, so we'd find it and conclude that he needed it as a disguise, or at least a cover, to get him into the office."

"Whereas he was actually someone who was known to the victim?"

"Exactly. He may never even have put the jacket or the cap on—just carried them in and planted them."

"Sounds like a bulky load. Maybe brought the uniform stuff and the revolver in a carryall or briefcase?"

They both reflected in silence for a few moments. Then Savage asked if Auburn had checked on Simms's alibi yet.

"No, sir. I figure the dentist's office records will keep for a couple of days until we decide if he's a suspect or not. And I haven't checked on Grantley's alibi either, but I'd bet it's airtight. After all, he came all the way in here this morning just to tell me about it."

"Sure. But if a guy like Grantley was actually behind this murder, he wouldn't be the one to pull the trigger. He'd get some starry-eyed disciple to blow Canavalt away in the name of clean air and pure water."

Savage spent several minutes studying the threatening letters. "When you dig through all the tommyrot," he said finally, "the writer is basically telling Canavalt that if he continues to seek election to the state senate, he'll be murdered. Assuming the writer of the letters is the killer, who stood to lose if Canavalt was elected?"

"Well, the incumbent, obviously. But that's Veronica Bedell, and they say she's about ready to retire anyway. Not that she couldn't have some starry-eyed disciples too."

Savage shuffled the photocopies of the letters. "Do we know what address these letters were mailed to?"

"No. The original sheets had been folded in thirds to fit in a business-sized envelope, but Portman couldn't find the envelopes, and there's no proof they ever actually went through the mail."

"Or that Canavalt ever saw them. You were saying something about having a consultant look at these?"

"Well, yes, just because the wording is so odd, with all the Latin and French. Sort of an unofficial consultant is what I had in mind—one of my old high school teachers, Donald Quick. He's retired, but he was always kind of a word detective. Used cross-word puzzles and cryptograms in the classroom."

Savage eyed him askance. "What kind of fee would we be talking about?"

"No fee. I'm sure he'd jump at the chance to do some verbal sleuthing just for the fun of it. You probably remember that he helped us clear up that apparent suicide a year ago last fall at the nursing home where he lives. I never thought he even knew my first name when I had him in high school, but last year he told me he'd been following my career in the papers all along—"

"A classic example of the Pygmalion effect."

"The which effect?"

"He likes to think you owe your success as a detective to his skill in teaching you French."

"Spanish."

"*Es lo mismo, ¿no?*"

At this sudden evidence of his boss's unsuspected fluency in Spanish, Auburn did a mental double take and found himself too dumbfounded to come back with an answer in any language.

Upon returning to his office, he called Mr. Quick's number at the nursing home. Getting no answer after ten rings, he moved on temporarily to other business. He was immersed in a rereading of the letters when his phone rang.

"Sergeant Auburn, this is Donald Quick. I think you were just trying to reach me? At least my phone says so."

They arranged a meeting later that afternoon. Lindenhaven Manor was situated in a densely populous residential district that had fallen somewhat from its former glories. Auburn parked in the enclosed court and found his way along corridors flooded with bright orange light and schmaltzy music to Mr. Quick's room in the Independent Living wing.

"Come in, Sergeant," said Quick, effusively cordial. He looked pretty much the way he had twenty years ago when he was making

Auburn memorize irregular verbs, with bright blue eyes and silvery hair tumbling over his ears and down the back of his neck. "Let me have your coat. I can't wait to learn what this puzzle is that you've brought me."

They sat at a round table that served Quick as a desk, and Auburn opened his briefcase. "As I mentioned on the phone," he said, "this is all strictly confidential."

Mr. Quick's eyes lit up with enthusiasm as Auburn placed the letters on the table. "That's what has me so intrigued. A secret document in Spanish, is it?"

"These are copies of some letters that I'd like you to look over. They're written in English, but a kind of weird, flowery English, with a lot of French and Latin quotations thrown in. You'll notice that the letters contain some threats. You've probably read something about this particular case in the papers, and you'll be reading more. But all I'm asking for is your impression as to what kind of person wrote these letters, and whether there's something there between the lines, so to speak—"

"And what all the foreign stuff means, eh?" Quick put on a pair of glasses and began reading through the letters rapidly, nodding now and then and occasionally making little clucking sounds of surprise or indignation. Meanwhile, Auburn sat back in his chair and ran his eye over the titles of the books tightly packed into the bookcase next to the bed, appraised the potted plants flourishing on the windowsill, and admired the vaulted ceiling.

"I notice," said Quick at length, "that all five of these letters are signed 'Ira Ventura.' Do you know of any such person?"

"So far we haven't traced anybody by that name."

"I thought perhaps that would be the case," said Quick with a coy nod. "*Ira ventura* is Latin for 'the wrath to come.' A Biblical phrase, you know," he added, in his fussy, pedantic manner.

He picked up the sheets and riffled their edges, frowning in distress as if he were preparing to hand back a set of particularly unsatisfactory assignments to his class. "There's nothing mysterious about the French," he said. "*Faute de mieux* means 'for want of something better' and *tout de suite* is as much as to say 'P.D.Q.' And so on through the rest of them. Virtually all of them could be found in any reference book on foreign expressions, maybe in any good English dictionary.

"Now let's look at the Latin. Take for example this sarcastic remark here at the opening of the second letter—*Congratulo te*."

"I think I can figure that one out for myself."

"Can you?" asked Quick, with arched eyebrows. Something in his manner warned Auburn that he was headed for an F in Latin.

"It seems obvious, doesn't it? The meaning is plain enough, I suppose, but the grammar—" He shook his head and made a face as if a vitamin pill had gotten stuck halfway down his throat.

"It's a deponent verb, you see—active in meaning but passive in form. So it's *congratulor*, not *congratulo*. And since it takes the dative and not the accusative, it should be *tibi*, not *te*. And, by the way, the more usual classical verb would be the simple *gratulor*. And then, in a sentence like this it's customary to put the verb last. So what does that come to—four mistakes in the compass of two words?"

"Suggesting that the writer probably knew French a lot better than Latin."

Mr. Quick fixed him with a sharp and somewhat aggrieved look, as if Auburn himself had written the faulty letter. "Let's take another one. '... Once a man in your position has forfeited his bona fides, they can never be reestablished.' The writer seems to think that *bona fides* is plural because it ends in *s*. But the Latin phrase, which means 'good faith,' is singular."

"Evidently—"

"Here's another one. In his fifth letter, Mr. Ventura promises the addressee that if he doesn't desist from his political campaigning he will end up as 'the corpus dilecti in a sensational murder case.' I'm sure you, as a police officer, know that the proper word here is 'delicti.'"

"Do you think it's possible that the mistakes are deliberate?"

"Of course they are! These mistakes must be deliberate, for the simple reason that a good Latin scholar wouldn't have made them, and anyone who doesn't know Latin, but can write English prose as clean and crisp as this, would have sufficient perspicacity to verify the Latin quips and quotes in a reliable reference work."

"But do you think there could be some hidden meaning here? I mean, why would anybody write bad Latin on purpose?"

"Ah," said Mr. Quick, with an air of dismissing the whole matter from his mind, "there's where the retired language teacher bows out and the professional detective takes over." He handed back the letters.

"So you find this writing clean and crisp?" asked Auburn. "I do. The style is turgid and bombastic, of course, but this is the work of a highly literate and cultivated writer. Let me point out just one example. In two of the letters you find the phrase 'conflict of interests.' That's the correct expression, with 'interests' in the plural, but it's not the way politicians and journalists talk nowadays, nor all the giddy sheep who parrot their babbling—pardon my rude jumbling of metaphors—"

He rambled on in this vein for several more minutes until Auburn, feeling that he had obtained all the information he was going to, and finding the atmosphere growing oppressively academic, thanked him and took his departure.

Something Quick had said about reference books had jogged Auburn's memory. Before leaving the nursing home parking lot, he called the offices of Canavalt Industries in the Bossart Tower and found that E. Bartlett Simms was still on the job. He arranged to meet him there within a half hour.

Was Simms really, Auburn wondered, such a zealous employee that he went right on working even though the boss was dead and his own future with the company was highly doubtful? Or was he perhaps at this very moment skimming company funds into a private account in anticipation of being given the sack by his new employer? Or concealing the traces of prior embezzlements?

The only difference Auburn noticed today in the office of Canavalt Industries was the absence of the corpus delicti. Simms barely looked up from his computer as Auburn entered. "Be with you in a moment."

"That's all right" said Auburn. "Take your time. Actually, I just want to check on a couple of things here in the office."

He let himself through the gate into the main office, sat down at the second desk, and examined the reference books on the shelf above it. Since Simms seemed in no hurry to finish the task he was working on, Auburn got out his notebook and took down one of the books from the shelf. After working for a few moments, he reached around to the feed tray of the printer on Simms's desk and borrowed a single sheet of paper to make some notes.

By the time Simms signified his readiness to answer questions, Auburn had finished his investigation and was on the point of leaving.

"Were you aware that Canavalt had received some letters recently that threatened his life if he went on with his campaign for a seat in the state senate?"

Simms's poker face gave away nothing. "No, sir. He opened his own mail, and he didn't discuss his personal affairs with me."

It was nearly dark by the time Auburn got back to headquarters. He went straight to the lab on the top floor and handed the sample of paper from Simms's computer to Kestrel.

"It's not the same paper," said Kestrel immediately. "This is twenty-four-pound stock with a Pergamus watermark and about a thirty percent rag content. What's all this scribbling?" With a frown of disapproval he glanced over the list Auburn had made: simpleton 470.8, dissimulation 614.3, execrable 913.12, insup-

portable 862.16. "Isn't that your handwriting?"

"Of course it is. And this sheet isn't evidence. I just happened to pick it up at Canavalt's office while I was making some notes from Roget's Thesaurus."

"Working on a novel?" asked Kestrel, his deadpan expression adding bite to the sarcasm in his tone.

"Those are the numbers that came through from something that was lying on top of the original letters," explained Auburn. "They're also the numbers of entries in a forty-year-old edition of Roget's at Canavalt's office. And all those words appear in the letters."

Back at his desk, Auburn looked up the phone number of the dental group in the Phoenix Medical Building. Then he called the office and, by giving a plausible imitation of a processing clerk working for a dental insurance firm, obtained verification that Simms had kept a long-standing appointment for a dental check-up at three thirty P.M. on Tuesday. The dentist had found a loose filling and had been able to work Simms into his schedule immediately to fix the problem. Simms had been spitting blood and gagging on the dentist's fingers at about the time Canavalt had been shot.

After plugging this information into the Canavalt file on his PC, Auburn scrolled through the rest of it one more time before preparing to go home. Then something jumped off the screen at him. The person who answered his phone call to Jervis Academy was also preparing to go home, but fortunately had been with the school long enough to be able to answer his question without consulting records.

When he checked out of headquarters around five, Auburn made it clear to the second watch commander that he was still working. Deciding to brave the slippery sidewalks instead of mingling in the rush hour traffic again, he walked from headquarters to the Underwood Apartments. Mrs. Canavalt seemed almost to have been expecting him. She looked less haggard than she had the day before, but also less composed.

A potent aroma of freshly brewed coffee made the gilded cage seem somehow more homelike and visitor friendly today. When she led him to the living room, Auburn was somewhat staggered to find Mr. Donald Quick sitting there in the same plush chair that Portman had occupied on the previous evening, with a bone china coffee cup at his elbow rather than a shot of scotch.

Mr. Quick expressed no surprise at seeing him and made no move to leave. "Please don't hesitate to proceed with the formalities, Sergeant," he said. "I'm here on practically the same errand you are."

"I'm afraid he's right," said Mrs. Canavalt. "Let's get it over with."

"I don't know if we're all talking about the same thing or not," said Auburn, looking from one of them to the other in bewilderment. "You're aware, aren't you, Mrs. Canavalt, that your lawyer brought me five letters at headquarters this morning that he had found among your husband's papers at the office?"

"Yes, I'm aware of that."

"I believe you wrote those letters yourself on the computer at your husband's office. You took along different paper and you looked up some words in an old thesaurus on the shelf over the desk. And you deliberately made mistakes in the Latin so that no one would suspect you of being the writer, considering that you used to teach Latin."

She was staring at a dark window with eyes full of tears. "Yes, I wrote them. Mr. Quick assured me you'd eventually figure that out, but I didn't expect you to get here so fast."

Auburn tried to keep his tone neutral. "What exactly was your reason for writing the letters, ma'am?"

"It all seems so stupid now. I wrote them to keep B. J. from running for state senator. Because he said if he got elected he'd move to the capital and let Simms carry on the business here."

"You objected so strongly to moving that you sent your husband death threats?" Auburn asked. Mrs. Canavalt toyed with her rings but made no reply. "Does Portman know who wrote those letters?"

"Of course he doesn't. I did everything I could think of to keep him from showing them to you."

"Everything short of telling him who wrote them. I hope you understand why I have to ask you where you were at four thirty yesterday afternoon."

"I do and I don't. How you could think I'd be capable of shooting my own husband . . ." Instead of finishing the sentence she just shook her head and shrugged. "Yesterday afternoon," she said, "I chaired a meeting of the Council for Retarded Citizens at the courthouse annex—a very painful and frustrating meeting because our funding has been cut again. I had just walked in here sopping wet and emotionally drained when the policeman came to tell me that B. J. had been fatally shot."

"If your presence at that meeting can be verified," said Auburn, "we won't need to bother you any further. I'm sorry to have to put you through all this, but it's my job to follow up any leads that could help us identify Mr. Canavalt's killer."

"She understands that," said Mr. Quick pacifically, as if somebody had hired him to moderate the proceedings.

Auburn turned to face him. "I still don't quite understand how you come into this, sir," he said.

"Quite simply. When you made copies of those letters, you didn't block out the name of the addressee. I knew that B. J. Canavalt had just been murdered, and that his wife was the former Henrietta Speedwell, my star Latin pupil from forty years ago—"

"Forty-two," said the former Henrietta Speedwell.

"—who went on to get a master's degree in classics and taught Latin at Jervis Academy for seven years."

"Mm-hmm." Auburn was struggling to conceal his irritation. "I had the idea, though, that you and I were playing on the same team."

"So we were," insisted Quick, without betraying the slightest embarrassment, "so we were. I told you I believed those letters had been written by someone pretending to be a numskull in Latin, which he or she was anything but. And you came to the right conclusion, just as I knew you would. But I thought it my duty to forewarn Henrietta what was coming because I was convinced of her innocence even before I knew she was somewhere else when B. J. was murdered."

"All the same, I can't help thinking I made a mistake by bringing you into the case."

"Well then, cheer up! It's a good sign when you discover that you've made a mistake. It means you're smarter now than you were when you made it!"

Auburn was finally remembering how very exasperating a teacher Mr. Quick had been, and why Spanish hadn't been his favorite subject. Making a mental note never again to call him in consultation, he got up to leave.

They didn't offer him any coffee.

The next morning's paper provided pretty strong confirmation of Grantley's alibi for Canavalt's murder by printing a photograph of the school group that had attended an all-day conference on juvenile drinking in Baltimore on Tuesday. There was Grantley grinning at him defiantly from the end of the row.

A report from the ballistics laboratory confirmed that Canavalt had been shot with the Smith and Wesson .32 found at the scene. Efforts to trace the the revolver had so far failed.

Later in the morning Auburn finally received a full report on the jacket and cap that had been found along with the weapon. A blacklight examination of the somewhat threadbare jacket had turned up marks identifying it as the property of Hopkins Uniform Rentals, a company that had gone out of business three

years before. Kestrel's report included a seemingly endless list of particulate material found on the jacket and cap. No human hairs had been found inside the cap, and washings of the fabric had yielded no traces of BST.

Auburn called Kestrel at the lab. "What's BST?"

"Typeable human secretions—blood, sweat, or tears. Also saliva, nasal mucus—"

"I get the picture. By the way, I noticed you found smears of cornstarch on the jacket."

"Correct. Also inside the right pocket and on the cap."

"Doesn't that look like somebody handled them after putting on or taking off a pair of rubber gloves that had been powdered with starch?"

"Or vinyl gloves. Certainly does."

"But you didn't find any gloves anywhere at the office?"

Kestrel, as was his annoying habit, pretended to take this as a statement rather than a question and didn't answer.

"Is there any chance," pursued Auburn, "that the gloves you had on—"

"There is *no* chance. My gloves are free of all particulate material. And Stamaty's come from the same supplier."

Auburn was edified to learn that Kestrel and Stamaty agreed on something. "How'd you like to go on a fishing expedition?" he asked.

Kestrel was notoriously deficient in a sense of humor. "Not in this weather," he said. "Or any other." Auburn half expected him to add, "—at least not with you."

"Well, listen to this. The killer planted the gun, the jacket, and the cap at the scene for a reason. For an equally good reason, he took the gloves away with him. But don't you think there's a fair chance he might have discarded those gloves somewhere on the premises?"

"You mean like in a trashcan down in the lobby?"

"If he was ever in the lobby. I'm guessing he went in on the mezzanine level from the parking garage and left the same way, so he wouldn't be seen by the guard at the desk."

"Have you talked this over with the lieutenant yet?"

"Not yet. I just thought of it in the last two minutes. I'll get back to you."

It was after lunch before the search operation could be coordinated with the maintenance supervisors of the Bossart Tower and the parking garage. Auburn accompanied Kestrel and an assistant to the scene in the evidence van and spent the next hour helping them sort through the dregs of a culture obsessed with up-to-date

information, disposable containers, carbonated beverages, and greasy food.

In a rubbish barrel at the bottom of the parking garage stairwell they found a single pair of latex gloves turned inside out. Refusing to turn them right side out at the scene, much less to perform a field test for traces of gunpowder residue, Kestrel carefully bagged and labeled them for the lab.

"Don't expect any fast answers," he warned Auburn. "If these gloves were used in the homicide on Tuesday, they've been lying here in the cold for almost forty-eight hours. I'll have to fume them with cyanoacrylate before I can dust them for prints, and if there are any prints, getting decent pictures of them will be like juggling Jell-O. And if I try to make it easier by cutting the fingers apart, some defense lawyer will convince the judge and jury that that renders the evidence invalid."

Friday dawned bright and clear but much colder. Shortly after ten o'clock Auburn met with Kestrel and Lieutenant Savage to review the evidence before crossing the street to the courthouse to apply for an arrest warrant. Finding no patrolman free to accompany him, he went alone to Portman's office after phoning to arrange a private meeting.

He wasted no time on preliminaries. "Mr. Portman, I have a warrant for your arrest on the charge of having murdered B. J. Canavalt." As he recited the Miranda warning, his usual emotional response to making a felony arrest—a wild mixture of elation and anguish—was amplified by his suspicion that the lawyer would somehow manage to weasel out of the charge.

Portman seemed to divine his thoughts. "You've got some hard evidence or you wouldn't be here," he said.

Auburn told him about the rubber gloves with gunpowder residue on the outside and Portman's fingerprints on the inside.

"Then nothing I say is going to make things any worse for me, so I'm going to explain my reason for putting down B. J. It wasn't business or politics. I just didn't want him to move out of town and take Henrietta any farther away from me than he already had."

He was playing with things on his desk as if he thought he might not be seeing them again for a while. Auburn couldn't tell if his manner reflected the chagrin of defeat or if he was relieved that his crime had been found out so soon.

"This had been brewing for a long time. Years. But it was B. J.'s plans for them to leave town that drove me to action. I had an idea at one time that I might sabotage his election campaign, but I could see that wasn't going to work. I decided to act while he was the object of a lot of public hostility—"

"And letter writing?"

Portman snorted contemptuously. "Those confounded letters Henrietta wrote wouldn't have worked either. I gave them to you in order to take some of the heat off me, but you can be sure that, if I'd known Henrietta had written them, you would never have seen them. Does she know about this yet?"

"Not from me."

"We all went to school together, Henrietta and B. J. and I." He took off his glasses and rubbed his face vigorously as if it were covered with cobwebs. "For a long time she and I were engaged. But lawyers who are just starting out don't make a lot of money, so she decided to go after the guy with the big bucks. And then almost immediately she realized she'd made a mistake. B. J. thought she and I had completely lost interest in each other after they got married—that's the way egomaniacs are, you know." He put his glasses back on and fixed Auburn with one of his penetrating stares. "How in this world did you ever think to look for those gloves?"

"No prints on the weapon," said Auburn simply, "and powdered starch on the uniform. The fake uniform wasn't such a bad idea, but you took a big chance using a revolver in a public building. Somebody could easily have seen you or heard the shot."

"I was pretty careful—at least until I threw away the gloves. Tuesday was the fourth time in a couple of weeks I went to B. J.'s office with the gun and the uniform in my briefcase. Those other times it was no-go because there were people around, but B. J. was a half inch from hell and didn't know it. Do I have to come with you now?"

"Yes, sir. I can give you five or ten minutes to tell your people you need to leave."

"You awake, Jim?"

Jim Jenclaire mumbled, "Mmm."

"You know what?"

"Mmm?"

"We never did see the rest of that Quote of the Day. You know? On the message board Tuesday."

"Mmm!"

"It's driving me bonkers. I'm going to get up and see if I can find it with a Web search. How did it start? Something about a garden?"

PANDORA'S GHOST TOWN

GILBERT M. STACK

The shotgun blast echoed through the canyon and the horse gave one final mournful whinny and died.

The stagecoach driver set down his smoking weapon, pushed his white hair back off his forehead, and tried to clear his throat. "I . . . I really hated to do that. Socks was a really good horse." He looked around at his passengers as if seeking support for his action. His eyes were red with suppressed emotion.

"Of course, you did, Mr. Butler," Corey Callaghan agreed. He clapped the driver on the shoulder. "We all understand that. The horse's leg was broken. You had to shoot him. It was the only decent thing to do."

Butler looked grateful for Corey's words, but before he could express his appreciation, another passenger cut in with his own observation. "That's fine for the horse, but what are *we* going to do?"

Corey shifted his attention to Dr. Fulton, who kept looking back and forth between the passengers, hoping someone could answer his question. As neither the driver nor any of the other passengers spoke up, Corey took it upon himself to reassure the man. Corey was tall and broad in the shoulders. As a professional bare-knuckle boxer, he knew his size could intimidate men, but there were times like this when it could also give reassurance. "We'll have to take a look at the stage and see just how bad the damage is," he told the doctor, "but good or bad, we'll be all right in the end."

The group was half a day out of Fort Bridger, trying to make their way to Evanston when the stage had rounded a bend in the trail, lurched badly to the right, and nearly gone over. The lurching had been abrupt enough to topple the team of horses breaking the leg of one of the animals.

"Well, what will we do if we can't fix it?" Dr. Fulton asked.

Again Corey waited for the driver to answer. Again he was disappointed.

"We'll cross that bridge if we come to it," Corey said. "No sense getting all worked up until we know if there's reason to worry."

"Surely the stage line will send riders out after us when we don't arrive in Evanston this evening," Mrs. Clifford suggested. She was a very stern-looking woman who had made it perfectly clear early in the trip that she thought it most improper that she and her husband should have to share a coach with boxers and gamblers.

Corey looked to Miss Pandora Parson, one of the gamblers Mrs. Clifford found so objectionable, to determine her thoughts on the subject. She was a fine-looking redhead with a sprinkle of freckles on her nose and a pensive expression on her face. They had been traveling together since Denver, where they had helped extricate each other from the schemes of a less-than-honorable Eastern gentleman.

Miss Parson quietly shook her head and Corey agreed with her assessment. The stage line normally sent only one coach from Fort Bridger to Evanston each week. Special arrangements had been made to accommodate the large numbers wanting to make this trip, but Butler had not proved as proficient a driver as the regular man and had not kept up with the first coach. It was quite possible that some time would pass before the stage line grew worried or even noticed that a second coach was missing.

Butler was still staring mournfully at his dead horse, so Corey went right ahead taking charge of things. "Well, why don't we see how bad the damage is?" He rolled up his sleeves exposing well-defined forearms. "Gentlemen, if you'd give me a hand?"

Patrick O'Sullivan stepped forward. He was Corey's boxing trainer, an older man with salt-and-pepper hair. "Just let me know what you want me to do. And mind you be careful of your ribs. They're not going to heal if you keep straining them."

None of the other men stepped forward. Butler continued to stare at Socks; Dr. Fulton clutched his bag against his chest; and Mr. Clifford kept reading from a large book that had occupied him since before he got on the stagecoach that morning. It was something to do with his theological studies at Bowdoin College, Corey gathered, although exactly what that was he didn't even want to understand.

Corey examined the wheel. Three spokes were broken, but the steel-wrapped circular frame appeared solid. He could work with that. The real problem was the axle beam that mounted the front wheels. The beam was cracked so badly that the wood had split four-fifths of the way through. It would never hold weight again.

"It looks bad," Patrick announced. He had absolutely no skill with carpentry or woodworking, but then the break in that beam

made the problem pretty obvious. "What can we do?"

Corey scratched his head under his cap. "Well, I can probably fix the wheel well enough to get us to Evanston, but the beam will have to be replaced."

"Well, get on with it," Mrs. Clifford said. She may not have wanted to share a coach with a boxer, but she clearly had no problem ordering one around. "We've wasted enough time in this desolate place already."

Corey stared at the woman for a moment, wondering how she could look at that split beam and not realize how much trouble they were in. Rather than emphasize the seriousness of their situation, however, he decided to get on with the task of getting them out of it. "Mr. Butler?"

The stage driver continued to stare at his dead animal as if it were the body of his closest friend. A tear tracked its way down his weathered cheek. "Poor Socks, I knew you were too old for this kind of work."

"Would you stop worrying about that dead animal?" Mrs. Clifford shrieked.

Mr. Clifford looked up from his book in surprise, trying to see what was upsetting his wife.

Mrs. Clifford strode over to Butler. "If you only knew how to drive the stage, none of this would have happened! Don't you know who I am?"

Corey hurried over beside them, put a comforting arm around Butler's shoulder, and turned him away both from Mrs. Clifford and the bloody horse. "I'm awfully sorry about your loss, Mr. Butler. Socks was a good horse—pulled with all of his heart."

"I've had him since he was a colt," Butler said. "I named him after those white markings on his legs. 'Why those look just like socks,' I said."

"A mighty fine name," Corey agreed. "And old or not, that horse could really pull."

"He surely could at that," Butler agreed.

"He wasn't going to stop for nothing," Corey continued.

"No sir," Butler said.

"Now I need you to ask yourself something, Mr. Butler. If Socks wouldn't quit, would he want you to?"

"I . . ."

"Or would he want you to keep pulling and get this coach into Evanston?"

"I . . . he'd want me to keep pulling!"

"Good, because we have womenfolk depending on you!" Two to

be precise, one of whom had walked back down the trail where she crouched examining the rock that had broken the stage.

"What do you want me to do?" Butler asked.

"Do?" Mrs. Clifford screamed. Evidently, waiting for Corey to finish encouraging the man had used up all of her remaining patience. "We want you to fix the coach and get us out of here!"

Butler scratched his forehead. "Well, I don't rightly think I can do that," he said.

"What? But this man," she pointed at Corey, "said he could fix the wheel and the axle!"

"Fix? Well, why didn't you say so?" Butler said.

Corey had not said he could fix that axle, but rather than get into a shouting match he decided to make the point another way. "Do you have a spare wheel and axle?" he asked.

"Why, no," Butler admitted. "This isn't the normal stagecoach. We don't have any spares. I was supposed to stay with the regular coach in case there was trouble, but Mrs. Clifford here didn't like riding through their dust, so I hung back and let them get ahead."

He looked around him, studying the terrain. "Truth to tell, I'm not sure this is the trail they took. Haven't seen any sign of them all day."

"Lord preserve us!" Mrs. Clifford wailed. "We're not on the normal run? What will be next? Red Indians swooping in to attack us?"

Corey ignored the outburst. "I don't think that beam can be fixed, but we might make a rough replacement if we find tools and wood. I've got some small woodworking tools we can use to shape some new spokes but no saws for working a larger piece of wood."

"Well, I don't have a saw," Butler told him, "but I have a good wood axe." For the first time since shooting the animal he left Socks's side, returned to the coach, and pulled a double-bladed axe from beneath the driver's seat.

Corey looked around him for a tree that might serve their purpose. He frankly doubted that without a saw he could turn a tree into even a rough beam suited to their needs—he certainly couldn't do it quickly. As it turned out, shaving a tree wasn't even an option. Most of the Wyoming territory Corey had seen was sparsely forested at best. This particular part was even more barren than most. What few trees there were growing on the side of the mountain were twisted and knot ridden. No straight limbs long and thick enough to serve were in sight.

Miss Parson was picking her way back down the trail. At first

sight, Corey thought her face was tight with concern, but as she drew closer he saw that he was mistaken. "How does it look?" she asked.

Corey shook his head. "Not good, the axle beam is cracked through."

Miss Parson took a moment to assess the surrounding terrain and quickly came to Corey's conclusion that nothing in the immediate vicinity would help them. "How far is it to the nearest town?" she asked Mr. Butler.

The weathered old man stuck a finger in his ear and dug at the wax while he considered the question. "Well, it must be at least ten or twelve more miles to Evanston."

"That would be a good run for you, Corey," Patrick said, his manner jovial despite their predicament. "It would get you back in shape real fast. But isn't there anything closer?"

Butler's finger finally found what it was digging for, and he flicked something dark onto the trail. "Well, I can't rightly say that there isn't. Towns spring up and die all the time out here."

Mrs. Clifford was working herself up for another explosion when her husband spoke, pulling his nose momentarily out of his book. His voice was quiet and unassuming. "Excuse me, gentlemen, I don't want to intrude, but I feel that it must be pointed out that my wife can't walk ten miles—especially not in this heat."

He took a white handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed at the beads of sweat on his forehead, then continued speaking. "I wouldn't take it on myself to tell Miss Parson what she can or can't do, but she also is a lady and cannot be expected to walk a great distance."

Mrs. Clifford harrumphed at her husband's genteel categorization of the lady gambler, but Miss Parson seemed to appreciate it. "Thank you for your consideration, Mr. Clifford," she said, "but I quite assure you that I will be able to walk as far as need be to get us out of here."

Mrs. Clifford harrumphed again, then her face boiled even hotter when she noticed the smile her husband was sharing with Miss Parson. As she began to turn her temper on him, Miss Parson broadened her comments to include the whole group.

"Perhaps such a long walk won't be necessary. No more than a mile or so back down the trail I noticed a broken sign pointing farther up the mountain. The letters *D* and *I* were clearly visible."

"That would be Digby," Butler told them. "It's an old mining town. They thought they had a rich strike, but it petered out fairly quick. There's nothing but ghosts inhabiting it now."

"Ghosts?" Dr. Fulton asked. He was so nervous to begin with

that it was difficult for Corey to determine if the question expressed skepticism or fear.

"Always ghosts in a town like that," Butler assured him. For the first time since the accident, some actual vitality was returning to his features. "Mining accidents, fights over ore, all kinds of reasons a town like Digby would be haunted."

"Do we have to listen to this superstitious nonsense?" Mrs. Clifford asked.

"It's not nonsense!" Butler protested.

"Oh really!" Mrs. Clifford threw up her hands in exasperation. "Why are we wasting our time on this? If the town is deserted, then it's no use to us anyway."

As Butler prepared to defend his ghosts again, Corey once again intervened. "Actually, that might not be true, Mrs. Clifford."

The scholar's wife looked too nonplussed to be contradicted.

Corey continued. "While it would certainly be best to find a town with a carpenter to do the work and a serviceable hotel to sleep in while he does it, an abandoned mining town should have what we really need—lumber. There will be buildings we can raid, and if there's an underground mine, there will be timber shoring up the tunnels. It's worth taking a look if it's not too far away."

"And just what will we eat in this ghost town?" Mrs. Clifford wanted to know.

"Eating could be a problem," Corey conceded. "We won't know how big a problem until we go see."

"I cannot believe we are even talking about this," Mrs. Clifford shouted.

"Just what are you proposing we do instead?" Miss Parson asked. "Your husband has already told us that you cannot walk to Evanston. Would you like to try riding one of Mr. Butler's other horses? It's quite difficult to ride bareback in a dress."

The look of shock and horror on Mrs. Clifford's face eloquently testified to her thoughts on that notion.

"Then what do you suggest we do?"

Mrs. Clifford found her voice again. "Why, we should stay with the stagecoach and wait for help."

Patrick slapped his thigh, clearly enjoying the opportunity to make Mrs. Clifford look foolish. "Weren't you listening earlier? Butler already told us that it could be days before the stage people notice we're missing."

Miss Parson supported this argument. "And as you have already pointed out, we have no food with us. I also do not see any water in the immediate vicinity. We cannot simply wait for help that may not be coming."

Dr. Fulton was staring back down the trail the way they had come, clutching his medical bag against his chest. "I don't think waiting is a good idea either."

"Well, naturally we would have to send someone for help," Mrs. Clifford retorted. "Any idiot can see that."

"It's not a good idea to send a man out alone on these trails," Butler commented. "Accidents happen. If I twisted an ankle, you'd all be waiting here with no help coming, and I might die."

"Then take someone with you!" Mrs. Clifford commanded. "Mr. Callaghan looks fit enough."

"Mr. Callaghan is injured," Miss Parson quietly informed them, "although I'm quite certain he will bravely volunteer to make the journey anyway."

Corey smiled. "I don't know how brave it makes me, but of course I'll go, if that's what we decide to do."

"Of course it's what you're going to do!" Mrs. Clifford said.

"And Mr. O'Sullivan and I will go as well," Miss Parson said.

Patrick looked surprised, but he did not contradict Miss Parson.

"You will not!" Mrs. Clifford snapped. "You'll only slow the men down."

"We will," Miss Parson insisted, "because Mr. O'Sullivan and I are far too intelligent to agree to remain here without supplies or anyone experienced in traveling these parts to stay with us. We would rather take our chances with Mr. Butler and Mr. Callaghan on the road."

"I'll not be talked back to by a two-bit—"

"Actually, Mrs. Clifford," Dr. Fulton interrupted, turning away from the back trail to rejoin the conversation. "I'll be traveling with Mr. Butler and Mr. Callaghan as well—if you'll have me, sirs. I barely know how to make a fire, much less take care of myself in the wilderness. I'd feel more comfortable sticking with men who clearly do."

"No one is leaving!" Mrs. Clifford shouted. "We can't leave! How will we carry my clothes and my husband's books?"

A portion of Mrs. Clifford's objections were beginning to make sense to Corey. "Well, no one is going to Evanston at least, it really is too far away for all of us to walk there in this heat. But we are going to have to go somewhere if we hope to fix the stagecoach. Mr. Butler, what do you think about Digby?"

"It might have what we're looking for," he agreed. "No way to know except to look."

"How far do you think it is?" Mr. Clifford asked, looking anxiously at his wife.

Butler scratched his head. "A mile or two, if I remember

correctly, once we turn onto the trail."

"Well, we might as well get on with it," Corey suggested, "while it's still daylight. We're going to need to bring both the wheel and the axle beam if I'm going to work on them. I'm also going to need my woodworking tools, the axe, any other tools Mr. Butler has, and that pail for watering the horses. Dr. Fulton, please bring your bag just in case someone gets hurt. I think everything else should stay on the coach."

"But my clothes?" Mrs. Clifford shouted. "We have to bring my clothes!"

Corey didn't respond to that. He fully expected to be the man carrying the axle beam because, as far as he could tell, they didn't have any harness that would let them turn the surviving horses into pack animals. Patrick would carry the wheel, Dr. Fulton the axe and his bag, and Miss Parson his tools. That didn't leave a lot of people for carrying clothes.

"Don't you ignore me!" Mrs. Clifford screamed.

"Mabel," Mr. Clifford said quietly, "they are just books and clothes. I'm certain they'll be right here when we get back again. Yelling at Mr. Callaghan because you are frightened is uncharitable."

"I am not frightened!"

Corey stepped past Mrs. Clifford toward the coach, where Miss Parson gently grasped his arm. "Mr. Callaghan," she whispered, "may I have a quiet word with you?"

Corey looked down into her face and was surprised to see how serious her expression was. "Patrick, will you and Mr. Butler start unloading all the luggage? We're going to have to prop the stage up on rocks to remove that axle, and that will be much easier if we dump the extra weight."

He walked with Miss Parson away from the others. "What else is wrong?"

"I don't think this accident was accidental," Miss Parson told him.

"What?"

"There is a large, sharp boulder set right around the bend in the trail where a coach or wagon would have to hit it. I think someone put it there to cripple a passing coach."

"You think someone wanted to wreck us?"

"Oh, I doubt it was our coach in particular, but I think someone wanted to stop a coach or wagon, and we had better consider the possibility that that same someone is watching us right now, waiting for us to leave the coach."

Corey looked around, noting the rugged terrain and scrub vegetation on the hill above and below them. It was certainly pos-

sible that someone was watching them unseen.

"You think it's Indians?"

Miss Parson shrugged. "Could be anyone or no one, but I think we had better be prepared for the possibility."

"Or no one? Could the rock have just rolled down the hill onto the trail?"

Miss Parson grimaced as she considered the possibility. "It's possible, of course, but I really don't think so. I think someone propped it up at the bend in the trail, but I don't know how long ago they did it or if they are around now."

Corey looked around again. There was no sign of anyone except Butler and his six passengers. He walked away from Miss Parson toward the coach. "Mr. Butler, we're obviously going to want you to bring your shotgun along as well. We might get a chance at some game on the trail."

It was roughly two hours before sunset when the seven travelers were finally ready to leave. Mrs. Clifford was still loudly complaining even though her husband had volunteered to carry one of her bags of clothing. Most everyone else had decided to carry some clothes as well.

For Corey it began with a gentlemanly offer to bring Miss Parson's light carpetbag in addition to the heavy axle. He was annoyed with Mrs. Clifford and felt strongly that Miss Parson should not be treated less well. The lady gambler didn't see it that way. When Corey refused to return the bag, she decided to add his own duffle to the tools she was already carrying. Patrick hefted the wheel, the axe, and his own light duffle. Dr. Fulton added his valise to his medical bag. And finally, Butler carried the shotgun, the pail, and the reins to his surviving horses. Only Mrs. Clifford carried nothing but her person.

As they started down the trail, Corey paused to examine the rock that had broken their axle. It was a roughly rectangular stone, longer than it was thick or wide. To hit the stagecoach it must have been sitting on one end, and it was difficult to see how it could have naturally ended up in that position. Even now, after the passing of the coach, it was lying flat on its side, far less dangerous an obstruction than it must have been when they had run into it. He couldn't help wondering if a stranger or three was even now planning to come out of cover to rifle through the belongings they had left with the stage.

Dr. Fulton was becoming visibly more nervous. "Is it very far?"

"Just a mile or so to the side trail," Butler assured him.

The ground above and below the trail was rugged in these

parts—by no means impassable by man or horse, but far more difficult going than the route taken by the stagecoach. Old wagon ruts were still visible in places, suggesting that traffic still occasionally passed this way. Doubtless it had been far busier when the mines at Digby were in operation.

Corey was feeling the stitch in his side and the soreness in his neck before he was a hundred yards past the bend in the road. He'd been in a hard fight at Fort Bridger that reaggravated injuries he'd received four or five weeks earlier.

Patrick was shouldering the wheel and the axe without complaint—a sure sign that he found the burden difficult. Miss Parson was walking along gamely, giving no appearance at all of effort. Butler also moved spryly, but then, he really wasn't carrying any burdens. Dr. Fulton seemed more and more concerned with the wilderness than his load, as if he expected the Sioux or a grizzly to suddenly appear out of the rocks. And Mr. Clifford was walking slowly but steadily. Mrs. Clifford, walking with nothing in her hands, expressed the most difficulty, praying in not-so-quiet tones for the Lord to help her with her burdens.

The sign for Digby had been posted little over a mile back down the trail, and the group paused to catch their breath around it. The flat board had broken where the nails had been driven into it, leaving only the first two letters of the name still posted. A brief search produced the other half of the board with the letters GBY still clearly visible upon them.

After a couple of minutes, Corey hefted the axle beam back to his shoulder and led the way up the new road. Butler had already admitted he hadn't traveled this route, so Corey saw no reason to wait for him to lead. The road was steeper but easily followed, with deep wheel ruts scoring the ground to guide them.

Patrick began to breathe harder; Mrs. Clifford to pray louder; but other than that the seven travelers climbed in relative silence until the sun was sinking over the hill above them and the shadows were stretching far across the ground.

Despite the fact that Miss Parson was walking behind Corey, she was the first to spot the buildings.

"There it is," Corey heard her say, breath rasping from the climb.

Corey turned back to look at her, rather than focusing his eyes ahead, failing in the first moment to grasp what she had discovered. Only Butler was still visible on the road. The rest of the travelers had straggled out behind them, raising the possibility that the others might lose their way in the growing dark.

As Corey watched, Patrick appeared around the bend, walking slowly but steadily, the coach wheel hung on the axe handle and slung over his shoulder.

Corey called out to the older man: "Patrick, can you see the Cliffords or Dr. Fulton?"

Patrick stopped, dropped his duffle, and wearily turned to look back the way he had come. "I see Dr. Fulton," he shouted up to Corey. Then he set the axe and wheel down to wait for the doctor.

"You set a good pace, Mr. Callaghan," Miss Parson said. She was still breathing heavily, but was clearly proud of herself for keeping up with him. "Why don't we set these things down here and help the others. The town is only a couple of hundred yards ahead of us, and it's getting dark."

Corey turned back around again, surprised that he had been so lost in his thoughts he had missed the first buildings. But there they were, looming out of the shadows ahead of him, half stone and half wood, and not particularly strong looking despite the combination. In Corey's experience, the bulk of a new mining town was composed of tents, so if Digby had collected a few permanent structures, it had likely survived for several years before failing.

Corey dropped Miss Parson's carpetbag and lowered the axle to the ground, trying to conceal both how winded he felt and how much his ribs twinged from the effort of lowering the wood without dropping it. "That's a fine idea," he agreed, "but there's no reason for you to have to walk back down there. I'll go help the doctor and the Cliffords."

Miss Parson set down Corey's duffle beside her carpetbag. "Mr. Butler," she asked, "would you mind waiting here while we go help the others catch up?"

"Yes, ma'am," Mr. Butler replied, leading his horse over by the small pile of bags and sitting down.

Miss Parson turned to Corey. "Shall we?"

He conceded gracefully and strolled with her back down to the bend in the road where Patrick waited.

"Not feeling winded are you?" Corey asked the old man, as if he couldn't see that Patrick's shirt, like his own, was drenched with sweat.

"Of course not," Patrick lied. "This little hike? I hardly noticed we were walking—although to help you with your training I'm willing to let you take this wheel the rest of the way up to town."

Corey grinned. "Just leave it right there if it's too much for you. We're going to help the doctor and Mr. Clifford first."

"Now what are you talking about?" Patrick sputtered. "Who said anything about this wheel being too much for me?"

Patrick hefted the axe and wheel back onto his shoulder, snatched up his duffle, and started up the road toward Butler.

Corey and Miss Parson watched him go. "Do you think that was wise to goad him?" Miss Parson asked. "He isn't young anymore."

"Goad him?" The accusation, slight as it had been, surprised Corey. "Oh, Patrick's in no danger. He's fit as a fiddle and will probably outlast us all. He just likes to make up excuses for me to do all the work."

"I know he does," Miss Parson agreed, "but it seems to me that he was almost asking you to help him. I wish you hadn't made finishing the trek a matter of pride."

Corey thought about that for a moment, then dismissed Miss Parson's concerns. It wasn't that he was convinced she was wrong, but since he *had* made finishing a matter of pride, nothing he could say now would make the old man relinquish the load. "We might as well help Dr. Fulton and the Cliffords," he suggested.

Dr. Fulton was only thirty feet away as they started walking toward him. He stopped as they approached and rubbed at the sweat dripping down his nose. "I'm afraid I'm not fit for walking these old roads," he told them. "Too much easy town living, I guess."

"You're doing just fine," Miss Parson assured him. "Digby is just a few hundred feet around the next bend."

The news did not appear to reassure Dr. Fulton. He wiped his face again and then started to pick up his valise and medical bag. "I guess I'd best be on then," he said. He seemed too exhausted to indulge in his customary nervous glances.

"Why don't you leave your bags here," Corey suggested. "We're going to head on down the trail to help Mr. Clifford, but we can pick them up on the way back."

Dr. Fulton hesitated, a cautious look of hope blossoming on his features. "That would be awfully kind of you."

He began to put the two bags back on the ground, then changed his mind, tucking the medical bag under his arm. "I think I'd better keep this one with me," he said, "but I'll be beholden to you if you help me with the other one. I don't know why I didn't just leave it behind with the coach."

As Dr. Fulton began to trudge up the trail, Corey and Miss Parson ambled in the opposite direction. They rounded the next bend without seeing any sign of the Cliffords and were almost to the next bend after that when Miss Parson came to a sudden halt.

"Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Corey asked her. He was more tired from carrying the axle beam than he wanted to admit and wasn't aware of much of anything save the growing darkness and the pleasant feeling of having Miss Parson walk down the road beside him.

"I thought I heard a horse whimper."

Corey slowly looked around him, straining his eyes and ears against the rapidly darkening wilderness. He didn't hear a horse, but there were voices.

"Honestly, John, you are so slow we've lost touch with the lot of them and they're so mean and jealous they probably won't wait for us, much less come back to help."

"Mabel, I'm walking as fast as I can. I'm a scholar, not a workman. I just can't keep up with those men—especially not while carrying this load of *your* clothing."

"I don't hear a horse," Corey noted. "Could it have been Mr. Butler's animal?"

Miss Parson considered that possibility. "I guess that must be it." Corey didn't think she looked convinced.

"Shall we help the Cliffords?" he asked.

"If we must."

The last rays of sunlight touched her face as she spoke, making her red hair shine like bronze. She really was too beautiful to be traveling around the West with Patrick and him. He wanted to take her hand as they walked toward the Cliffords but knew that it was inappropriate. Corey Callaghan was a destitute bare-knuckle boxer with nothing at all to offer a refined and intelligent woman such as Miss Parson. Trying to take her hand might be the liberty that drove her off.

"Who's there?" Mrs. Clifford demanded as they came into view.

"It's just us," Miss Parson assured her, "Mr. Callaghan and Pandora Parson."

"Alone?" Mrs. Clifford gasped.

"Oh, Mabel, do be quiet," her husband admonished her. "Can't you see they've come back to help us?"

"But they're not married!" Mrs. Clifford reminded him.

"Please hush," he said again, setting the suitcase with his wife's clothing on the ground. "Thank heaven, Mr. Callaghan. I know you warned us about carrying too much, and I really wish I had listened. I can't remember when my arms were more tired."

"That's all right," Corey assured him. "I'll take it now. You're almost there. Just a quarter mile or so and you can rest."

The sun finished slipping beneath the mountain. It was so dark he could not see either of the Cliffords' faces.

"Goodness," Mrs. Clifford asked, "how will we see to walk up the road?"

"The stars and the moon will be out soon," Miss Parson told her. "They're not street lamps, but as our eyes adjust to the darkness we'll get by."

"In the meantime," Corey suggested, "why don't we take it very slow. It's not far and we'll feel better when we make it to town."

"I certainly am thirsty," Mr. Clifford informed them.

"They wouldn't have built the town without a well or a creek nearby," Miss Parson assured him.

Corey picked up the Cliffords' bag and grunted with surprise. It was twice the weight he had expected. "I thought it was clothes you had in here, not lead."

Mr. Clifford cleared his throat uncomfortably. "I'm afraid I may have added one or two books to the bag before we left the stage."

"Only one or two?"

"Well, maybe a few more than that. You see, you indicated that it may take you some time to craft a new piece to serve as our axle, and I wanted to make certain I had enough to read."

"How on earth did you fit them in?" his wife asked. "I thought I had packed this bag quite full."

Mr. Clifford was probably blushing, but in the darkness, Corey couldn't see well enough to be certain. "I may have been forced to remove one or two of your dresses," he confessed.

"My dresses?" Mrs. Clifford shouted.

Corey grinned and began lugging the suitcase up the road. Miss Parson fell into step beside him.

"I thought it was right around here," Miss Parson said.

Corey put the Cliffords' suitcase down to help her search for Dr. Fulton's valise. The Cliffords had fallen behind again, but Corey could clearly hear them continuing to argue over the books and dresses.

"Are you certain he left it?" Corey asked. "I mean, I thought he did, but maybe I'm just not remembering correctly. He kept his medical bag, didn't he?"

"He left it right around here," Miss Parson insisted.

Corey walked around in a fairly tight circle looking for the missing bag. "I just don't see it."

"Neither do I," Miss Parson said, an edge of frustration sharpening her voice.

The Cliffords loomed out of the darkness, breaking off their argument when they saw Corey and Miss Parson searching the

dark road. For the moment, at least, Mrs. Clifford's voice lost its sting. "What is wrong now, Mr. Callaghan?"

Corey continued to scan the dark path. "We thought Dr. Fulton was leaving his valise for us to carry the rest of the way, but we can't find it."

Both of the Cliffords looked around them.

"I don't see it," Mrs. Clifford announced.

"Perhaps," Mr. Clifford suggested, "Dr. Fulton changed his mind and retrieved the bag himself."

Miss Parson dubiously admitted that that was a possibility.

"Then may we please finish walking to town?" Mrs. Clifford asked in the most genuinely civil tone she had used since meeting Corey and Miss Parson that morning. "I am mortally tired and would dearly love to sit in a comfortable chair and rest."

"Dr. Fulton," Corey called, as the Cliffords, Miss Parson, and he caught up with the others. "Did you come back down the trail for your bag? We looked, but we couldn't find it."

Dr. Fulton was clearly surprised by the suggestion. "Why, no, I've been sitting here discussing our situation with these gentlemen. You must have missed it in the dark."

Corey set down the Cliffords' suitcase. "Oh, sorry. I guess I'll go back down and take another look."

Dr. Fulton began to nervously look about him again. "I . . . don't think that's necessary. There's nothing truly important in that bag. I don't know why I didn't just leave it behind in the stagecoach. Why don't you let it wait until morning?"

Corey was tired enough to truly appreciate that suggestion, but he didn't like failing in a responsibility. "I really don't mind walking back down there."

"No, no, I insist," Dr. Fulton said. "Let it wait until morning. Frankly, it's much more important that we get some shelter over our heads."

"All right then," Corey said. "If no one objects, let's walk into town." He bent down and hefted the broken axle beam back on to his shoulder, grunting with the effort and the pain.

Patrick and Miss Parson resumed their loads fairly quickly, but Mr. Clifford was noticeably slower in picking up his burden.

Corey started into town with Miss Parson staying close beside him. The final shades of sunset had disappeared and the moon and stars were sharing their luminescence with the night sky. The first building rose quickly out of the darkness, and Corey steered Miss Parson well to the left of it. "Hello," he called out, his voice echoing about them. "Is anyone here?"

He waited with faint hope that the town might not actually be deserted, but no one chose to answer him. The scattered dark buildings looked particularly unwelcoming.

"I think," Miss Parson said, "we should start with the town's saloon."

Mrs. Clifford harrumphed, evidently too tired to state her opinion more clearly.

"It will have large windows and at least one sizeable room. We'll need the space and whatever light we can gather, at least until we start a fire," Miss Parson explained.

"Good thinking," Corey told her. And then to the rest of the group asked: "Do any of you gentlemen smoke? Matches would be a real help in starting a fire."

"I might have a couple left over from my last victory cigar," Patrick volunteered.

"I smoke a pipe now and again," Butler added.

"Then let's make that fire now in the middle of the street," Corey suggested. "I don't fancy exploring buildings without being able to see where I'm stepping."

It didn't take long to gather brush and wood and make the shavings. Within fifteen minutes a cheery little fire was burning, and Corey was wrapping strips torn from an old shirt around a larger branch to make a torch. Before lighting it, he quickly surveyed the rest of the town: a motley collection of mostly small buildings leading up to a dark hole in the side of the mountain.

"We'll go in there tomorrow to look for timber," Corey announced, indicating the entrance to the mine. "With any luck, we'll find unused beams waiting to be used to shore up the tunnel. If not, we'll figure out how to free one of the timbers already bracing the roof without pulling the mountain down on top of us."

"We can also scavenge the buildings," Butler said. "I've never seen a deserted town that didn't leave at least a few useful things behind. I doubt we'll find a saw, but there ought to at least be candles."

"What about tonight?" Mr. Clifford asked.

"Well, Miss Parson got that right," Corey said. "It's best if we all stick together until we know what we're dealing with here. I'll look over the saloon now and see if it will shelter us until morning." He stared at the largest building in town, trying to read the sign by the moonlight. It loomed above them, dark and foreboding. He really didn't want to go in there with only a poorly fashioned light.

"The Golden Nugget," Miss Parson read, "how original. If I had a dollar for every saloon called the Golden Nugget that I've played cards in I could give up gambling."

"Who are you trying to fool?" Patrick asked her, mirth bolstering his tired voice. "You'll never give up gambling no matter how rich you are."

Despite the darkness, Corey was certain Miss Parson was smiling. Mrs. Clifford groaned but did not comment.

Corey struck his makeshift torch into the fire and ignited it. "I'd better take a look inside."

Miss Parson hurriedly gathered up some brush and kindling. "There's a chimney on the far side of the building. If we make a fire there, it should light the whole inside."

"You're coming?" Corey asked.

"Of course, you didn't think we'd let you go in there alone, did you?"

Patrick gathered up some more brush and a few larger sticks and followed after them.

The interior of the Golden Nugget redefined darkness. It wasn't technically pitch black because Corey had his makeshift torch and the large, mostly glassless windows let in some light from the campfire and the moon. But those light sources didn't spread very far. Instead, they seemed to forge even deeper shadows, doing more to destroy Corey's night vision than to illuminate the hall.

"I can't see anything!" Patrick complained as he finished pushing through the batwing doors.

Corey stepped deeper inside, carefully making his way through the darkness. His shins bumped against a stool or a chair, forcing him to alter course. Patrick grabbed hold of the back of Corey's shirt to use as a guide rope. Presumably Miss Parson was doing the same at the end of the line.

"I wonder if we could use these tables for our new axle beam," Patrick said.

"It depends on how thick and warped the wood is," Corey said. "I'll take a look at them when it's daylight."

They were halfway across the room now, shuffling slowly forward, carefully avoiding mishap. The scant light of the torch was already fading, raising the very real prospect that they would finish this journey in utter darkness. "Patrick," Corey said, "will you give me a handful of that brush?"

Patrick complied, and Corey touched the sputtering torch to the dry wood. Immediately, the dying fire flared to new life.

"Careful, me lad," Patrick said, stepping back away from the blaze.

Corey quickly scanned the saloon, then darted across the floor to thrust the burning branches into the fireplace. Miss Parson

pushed past Patrick and placed the brush she was carrying on top of Corey's. The flames leapt even higher, sending a fan of sparks up the chimney. A sudden rustle of wings announced that the bats inside did not appreciate the intrusion. Yellow light radiated out with the heat, illuminating in that first burst of passion nearly half of the saloon's main hall.

The years had not been kind to the building. Wind, rain, and animals had all made their presence felt. But for a night or two it was shelter from the outdoors, and Corey felt comfortable inviting the others in to join them.

"I can't believe you intend to bring those animals inside with us," Mrs. Clifford complained.

Butler was not dissuaded by her protest. "These are valuable horses."

"It's too late and dark to fix up a stable for them," Corey explained, "and we can't afford to let anything happen to them. If we're able to fix the stagecoach, we'll need the horses to pull us to the next station."

"If?" Mrs. Clifford asked. "I thought you said you could fix the stage."

Corey spread his hands. "I'll do my best."

"But I—"

Mrs. Clifford stopped in the entrance to the Nugget, staring in horror at the turned-over tables and the carpet of leaves and other detritus. "This cannot be happening! You cannot expect a woman such as myself to sleep in this room!"

"Mrs. Clifford," Miss Parson asked, "what else do you expect the men to do? The stagecoach is broken and we are in the middle of the Wyoming wilderness. We have no help and so must fend for ourselves. Why make everyone feel worse by complaining? Put up with it because you have to and do everything in your power to help Mr. Callaghan fix the axle and wheel."

"But this is horrible!" Mrs. Clifford wailed.

Her husband put down their suitcase, stepped up beside her, and with a comforting arm around her waist guided her over near the fire.

"It's pretty bad," Patrick agreed as he picked up the Cliffords' bag. "But my Corey will get us out of this."

Butler looked up suddenly as if a new idea had just come to him. "Wait a minute, I'm the stage driver. I'll get us out of this."

"Oh, please be silent, you worthless old man!" Mrs. Clifford said. "It's your fault we're in this predicament."



It was a mostly sleepless night for everyone. The old saloon creaked and croaked even before the wind picked up near dawn, and it exuded a musty, rotten odor that spoke of dead things in the walls and under the floorboards.

Whenever Corey opened his eyes he seemed to find someone staring at him. Mostly it was Mrs. Clifford or Dr. Fulton, but everyone seemed to engage in the pastime at some point in the endless evening. Butler was the worst of them. Corey had thought they were getting on well together, but he didn't like the way the old man peered at him from his chair across the room.

Mr. Clifford spent the night by the fireplace reading one of his books and only occasionally seemed to remember that they were in an abandoned town in the middle of nowhere. Patrick tossed restlessly to and fro, and Miss Parson sat propped over one of the small tables like she'd fallen asleep playing cards.

Around midnight, Corey rose and added wood to the fire, rekindling the blaze. Wyoming nights were cold, and the fire made the room much cheerier and more comfortable. He did the same around two o'clock and finally drifted off to sleep around three.

"Who's there?" Mrs. Clifford shouted.

Corey leapt from sleep to groggy consciousness in the same motion that brought him springing to his feet.

"Out there!" Mrs. Clifford shouted, pointing with her finger. "Out the window!"

Corey whirled from facing Mrs. Clifford to facing the outdoors, staring through the broken glass into the dark Digby street.

"I don't—"

"It was a man!" Mrs. Clifford said, her voice trembling on the edge of hysteria.

Corey darted across the hall to get a better look. Everything outside of this room was darkness and deeper darkness. There was nothing even vaguely manlike visible.

"I saw him!" Mrs. Clifford insisted, "staring in the window at us while we were sleeping."

"I don't see him now," Corey announced.

"There, there, Mabel," Mr. Clifford said. "I'm sure you were just dreaming."

"I was not dreaming!" Mrs. Clifford retorted. "A man was watching us while we slept. Why don't one of you men go out there to find him?"

"Now Mabel," her husband began again.

"As the Lord is my witness," Mrs. Clifford swore, "I was not dreaming!"

"I . . . I don't think going out in the dark is a good idea," Dr. Fulton said.

"That's true," Butler agreed. "There's lots of little dangers around an old mining town—sinkholes, cave-ins—"

"Mr. Callaghan," Mrs. Clifford pleaded, angering Butler by interrupting him, "won't you please go outside and at least look for a sign?"

"He can't find any sign at night," Butler said, bitterness tainting his voice.

"I can't find a sign anytime, Mr. Butler," Corey said. He tried to make his voice sound light and hearty. He really didn't understand Butler's sudden hostility. "I don't have the skill."

He turned to Mrs. Clifford. "I'll go out there and look around if you want me to, but I have to be honest: I'm not going to find anyone in this darkness who doesn't want to be found."

Mrs. Clifford looked around her uncertainly, seeking support from the other passengers.

"It's quite possible," Miss Parson said, "that you did see someone. I wouldn't be surprised if a few miners are still trying to work this claim. It would be natural for them to be curious about us and suspicious of our presence. I suggest we stay here tonight and in the morning, loudly and publicly go about our business as quickly as we can. Everyone will be happier when we leave again."

"I did see someone," Mrs. Clifford insisted.

"I believe you," Miss Parson said.

Dr. Fulton noticeably shuddered at this confirmation.

"Let's all go back to sleep," Butler said.

Mrs. Clifford still looked frightened and uncertain, so Corey spoke up again. "It's up to you, Mrs. Clifford. I'll still go look around if you want me to."

Butler snorted at the suggestion.

"Mabel," Mr. Clifford said, "let's just go back to sleep."

"All right," Mrs. Clifford agreed at last. "If Mr. Callaghan believes it's safe to stay here."

Butler bristled. "As if he knows anything about it!"

"I think," Corey said, "it's safer to stay inside than to wander about in the dark."

"All right then," Mrs. Clifford agreed, wrapping her arms around herself and huddling down in her chair. Her eyes were glued to the window, looking for another glimpse of the stranger.

Corey returned to his own seat, knowing that none of them were going to get much more rest.

Dawn broke on a hungry and exhausted group of travelers.

Corey stood and stretched his weary muscles. "Mr. Butler," he called with forced cheeriness. "Why don't you and I go see if we can scrounge some breakfast?"

Butler struck Corey with a baleful glare. "What makes you think you can give me orders?"

"No orders," Corey said, "just an offer, if you'd like to come."

"I'll come," Miss Parson volunteered. "There's probably an old garden with wild vegetables growing, and I'd like to find some water to drink and wash my face."

"Glad to have you," Corey said. "Mr. Butler?"

Butler turned his back on Corey, so the boxer shrugged and left with Miss Parson.

"That problem is going to get worse, not better," she observed when they had made their way a few dozen feet from the old saloon.

"Problem?" Corey asked.

"Mr. Butler wants to be in charge of things, but he doesn't know what to do. That makes him very jealous of you."

"That's foolish," Corey protested. "I'm not in charge of anything."

"Of course you are. You are the only person here with the strength and the initiative to lead, and the only one who has any practical idea how to fix the stagecoach."

They wound their way behind a line of three small houses.

"Look," Miss Parson said, pointing ahead of them. "Gardens, just like I hoped. And there's a creek just beyond them."

The three small gardens were scraggly things, well picked over by the animals, but a variety of plants had survived, most noticeably squash and potatoes. They quickly filled Corey's cap and Miss Parson's hands, then decided to return to the Golden Nugget to share the good news with the others.

Their cheerful mood was spoiled when Corey almost stepped in fresh horse droppings. The two friends looked at each other. "Mrs. Clifford's visitor?" Corey asked.

Miss Parson shrugged. "I did think I heard a horse last night."

"I don't suppose Mr. Butler's horses could have gotten over here."

"No."

"What odds would you give that I'd find Dr. Fulton's suitcase if I walk back down the road to look for it?"

That got a smile from Miss Parson. "I respect you too much to take your money like that."

"You really think this is a miner?"

"It could be, but I doubt it." Miss Parson began ticking off points on her fingers. "The man in the window, the missing suitcase, the horse and the droppings—those could all be a miner looking us

over. But the stone in the road that started all of this—I just don't think so."

"Aye," Corey said, "that makes sense to me. So who is stalking us, then, and what do we tell the others?"

"I don't know," Miss Parson admitted. "I just don't know."

In the end, they told the others nothing, deciding to wait and see if they noticed anything themselves. They brought the food they had gathered back to the saloon and emptied out Corey's duffle bag so they could carry more. Patrick and Mr. Clifford accompanied them back to the garden, along with Mrs. Clifford's admonition to wash the food this time before returning with it. Neither Patrick nor Mr. Clifford noticed the horse droppings, or at least they didn't comment on their significance if they did.

After breakfast, Corey prepared to find the wood he needed to repair the stagecoach. "Look," he said, using the axle beam he had carried up the road as his model. "We're going to need a piece of wood about five feet long, six inches wide, and five or six inches thick. My first thought is to look in the actual mine. Those timbers are longer than we need, but with the axe we should be able to cut them down to size."

"That's my axe," Butler noted.

"I know," Corey said. "What's your point?"

"It's my axe," Butler repeated. "I should be the one to use it."

Corey shrugged. "Whatever you want."

Butler seemed satisfied with that answer, so Corey continued. "Another possibility is some of these roof beams. They aren't quite the right size either, but I think we might make them work if we have to."

"What about these tables?" Dr. Fulton asked. "There are a lot of them and they're right here."

"The wood is too thin," Corey explained. "I'd have to break them up and then stack them together. But they're also warped, so they won't stack very well, and that means they probably won't be strong enough to support the stagecoach. I'll use them only as a last resort."

Corey looked around. "Any other questions? Good. Now if you're all willing I'd like to split us into two groups."

"There you go giving orders again," Butler complained. "Who died and made you God?"

An uncomfortable silence rippled through the group. Corey waited a moment for anyone else to comment, then continued as if he hadn't been interrupted.

"It will only take two or three of us to work on the new axle. I thought the rest of you might like to search through town and see if you can find anything useful to us—candles, matches, buckets, bottles, a saw—"

"I said, Who died and made you God?"

Corey sighed. "Mr. Butler, would you like to step outside and tell me what's troubling you? Yesterday, I thought we were friends. Today you seem awfully angry at me."

"I'm the stage driver! I'm the one who should be in charge!"

"Oh, what do you know about anything?" Mrs. Clifford snapped.

"Mrs. Clifford, please," Corey said, keeping his voice soft, despite his own frustration. "We need Mr. Butler! He's the only one of us with the experience to drive that stage over these rough roads. He's also the only one who knows the route to Evanston. He's quite right. As the stage driver, he's the captain of the ship and should be in charge. What do you want us to do, Mr. Butler? I'm sorry I overstepped my authority."

Butler puffed his chest out with pride and stood to address his passengers. "Well now, that's more like it. Now what I want is . . ."

Butler's voice trailed off as he tried to figure out what to do.

Patrick erupted in a fit of laughter. "Corey, me lad," he said, slapping his thigh as he struggled to force the words out through his mirth. "That's the funniest thing . . . All of that and he . . ."

Butler's face was growing red with embarrassed rage. "Stop it! Stop laughing!"

Mr. Clifford was also smiling now, and Mrs. Clifford covered her mouth with her hand. Miss Parson's eyes were wide with concern.

"Please stop laughing!" Corey begged.

That made Patrick laugh even harder. Then Dr. Fulton began to chuckle as well.

"Stop it!" Butler screamed. He whirled left and right, glaring at his passengers, then turned to thrust a quivering finger at Corey. "I'll get you for this, Callaghan! Nobody makes a fool of me!"

He charged out of the saloon, leaving the batwing doors swinging behind him.

Corey started after him. "Butler!"

Miss Parson caught hold of his arm. "Let him go, Mr. Callaghan. Let him cool down."

"But I—"

"I know, but you can't do any good with him now. Maybe he'll let me talk to him once he's calmed down."

Patrick and Corey entered the mine with another jury-rigged

torch. Corey didn't think they would have a lot of time before the torch burned out, and he hoped it would be enough. The shaft was light enough for about ten feet, but then it darkened quickly. A lantern hung just inside the entrance to the shaft, but there was no oil in it and so it was of no use.

"Seems like there ought to be some candles left around here somewhere," Patrick said.

"Let's not waste any time looking for them," Corey replied. "The torch is burning. Let's see what we can find."

Timbers braced the tunnel about every fifteen feet, but there was no metal or wood track on the ground to remove the ore. There was, however, a wheelbarrow some thirty feet inside the tunnel, a clue to how the miners had transported dirt and supplies.

It was very dark beyond the flickering glow of the torch, but within that fragile illumination Corey could see just well enough to navigate. He found what he was looking for about one hundred feet into the darkness. A long niche had been cut into the wall of the tunnel and loaded with supplies: two more wheelbarrows, three pickaxes, a shovel, nine wooden buckets, a box of short candles, and seven timber beams some seven feet long, ten inches wide, and four inches thick.

The first thing Corey did was light several candles to ward off the darkness that would accompany the death of his torch. Then he handed the torch to Patrick, grasped one end of the top timber, and began to slide it off the pile. "Dear God, Patrick, but this is heavy."

"Aye, me lad, I'm sure it is."

"I mean, it's several hundred pounds heavy. How am I supposed to carry it? My side is still sore from yesterday."

"Sore is it?" Patrick asked, not really showing any concern. "Didn't I warn you to be careful?"

"Not that I can recall."

"Of course I did. Maybe this time you'll pay attention when I try to help you."

"I'm listening," Corey assured him. Not that he believed for one second that Patrick had some magic trick for carrying the beam out to daylight.

"Then pay close attention. It's called a wheelbarrow. You balance the timber on top of it and let it do the carrying."

It wasn't quite as simple as Patrick had said it would be, but the wheelbarrow did the trick in the end. It also let them make a second trip into the mine to cart out the candles, buckets, shovel, and one of the pickaxes. Corey didn't know that they needed these things, but he felt it was better to have them than to want them.

Supplies gathered, it was time to start fixing the stage.

"It's my axe and I'm going to use it!" Butler insisted.

Corey finally lost his temper. "I'm not arguing with that, you old fool, but if you keep chopping there, I'm going to have to go back in the mine and get another timber.

Butler was as angry as Corey. "I know what I'm doing!"

"No, you don't!"

Butler stepped across the beam, holding the axe up between them. It was chest high, not drawn back over his head to swing, but the position was threatening nonetheless. "I'm good and tired of listening to a dumb mick who thinks he's better than me."

Corey hit him hard in the gut with his right fist, then danced out of the way as Butler and his axe doubled over. A sharp left shot straight out from his shoulder and struck Butler's jaw. The stage driver went down hard, and Corey kicked the axe away from him.

"I am good and tired," he mimicked Butler, "of listening to no-account sons of Englishmen call me a dumb mick."

He waited for Butler to get up, but the stage driver didn't accommodate him. Corey picked up the axe and handed it to Patrick. "Can you cut this beam for me?"

"Aye," Patrick agreed. "That punch hurt your ribs?"

"Not a bit," Corey assured him, "but I think chopping wood might."

He touched a place on the beam with his foot. "No closer than here, understand?"

Patrick marked the spot with the axe: "Aye, you can count on me, Corey, me lad."

Corey finished shaving the table leg and compared it to the surviving wooden wheel spokes. It wasn't perfect, but he thought it would do. His timing was also good. Outside, Patrick had just finished chopping, and Corey needed to see what he'd have to work with. He fit the spoke into the hub of the wheel and then pulled heartily against the rim while he muscled the piece into place. It resisted for a moment and then snapped into the slot. The result was looser than Corey had hoped, but he thought it would serve.

"Are you hungry, Mr. Callaghan?" Miss Parson asked him. "Mrs. Clifford has boiled some more potatoes. You can wash up as soon as Mr. Clifford returns with another pail of water."

A gunshot cracked across the dry mountain air, startling everyone in the saloon.

Corey dropped the wheel and leapt to his feet. Miss Parson was

looking about her, trying to identify the source of the sound. Dr. Fulton threw himself to the floor and pulled a table over top of him. Mrs. Clifford stood by the fire as if she didn't understand what was happening.

"It's not Mr. Butler," Miss Parson said, pointing to his shotgun in the corner. "At least, he's not the shooter."

"Patrick!" Corey shouted, moving toward the batwing doors.

"Corey, me lad," Patrick shouted back, running around the side of the building, the double-bladed axe still in his hands.

The relief that Patrick was unhurt rushed past Corey and transformed instantly into concern for the other men. "Mr. Butler?" he shouted.

The stage driver appeared on the far side of the street, running toward the Golden Nugget. "Callaghan!" he shouted back.

Corey was outside now, trying to figure out where to go.

"The creek," Miss Parson reminded him.

Corey ran.

Mr. Clifford lay on his back on the bank of the creek, staring up at the sky while the blood leaked out of his shoulder.

"Are you alive, man?" Corey asked him as he, Miss Parson, Mr. Butler, and Patrick dropped to their knees beside him.

"I feel most peculiar," the theologian said.

"Where's Doc Fulton?" Butler asked.

"Back in the Nugget," Patrick answered him.

"Gentlemen," Miss Parson said, "whoever shot Mr. Clifford could choose to shoot us as well. We have to get him back to the saloon."

"I'll get my gun," Butler announced, then jumped up and sprinted back the way they had come.

"We need to move quickly!" Miss Parson reminded them.

"It will make him bleed faster," Patrick warned.

"Now!" Miss Parson insisted.

Corey scooped Mr. Clifford into his arms, eliciting a scream from the smaller man. Both Patrick and Miss Parson helped him to his feet, then all three turned and dashed for the saloon.

"John!" Mrs. Clifford screamed when she caught sight of her bleeding husband. She hurried to Corey's side as he pushed open the batwing doors and knelt to lay her husband on the floor.

"Where's Dr. Fulton?" Corey asked.

"We can't stay here!" Butler said. His eyes were wide with fear, and he kept turning in circles, looking for someone to shoot with his shotgun. "Those windows make this room wide open. We can't stay here!"

"He's right," Miss Parson said. "Let's carry him back to the manager's office."

Corey picked Mr. Clifford back up and followed Miss Parson to the back of the hall, where a small office housed a desk and three chairs. A door and shuttered window were in the back wall. It wasn't big enough to comfortably hold all seven of them.

"Where's Dr. Fulton?" Corey asked again.

A timid voice answered from beneath the desk. "I'm right here."

"What are you doing down there?" Corey asked. "Mr. Clifford's been shot."

The doctor didn't answer him.

"Mr. Clifford's been shot," Corey said again, laying the wounded man on top of the desk.

Dr. Fulton didn't move.

"Help him!" screamed Mrs. Clifford. "He's bleeding to death!"

There was a generous amount of blood coloring Mr. Clifford's shirt, but Corey doubted it would prove quite that serious now that the doctor was here to help.

"It isn't safe," Dr. Fulton insisted.

"Please!" Mrs. Clifford pleaded.

Corey stepped around the desk so that he could see the doctor. The man was huddled down with his hands covering his ears. "I don't know what to do," he whimpered.

"Oh, for Pete's sake," Patrick swore. "Corey, me lad, get me some clean clothes to use as bandages. I've patched up a lot of boxers in my day. I guess I can fix a bullet hole too."

Mrs. Clifford ran from the room to fetch her bag of clothing, returning almost immediately and thrusting one of her precious dresses into Patrick's hands.

"Can someone cut me some wide strips of cloth?" Patrick asked, then turned his attention to the wound, carefully pulling Mr. Clifford's shirt out of his bloody shoulder.

It looks like the bullet went clean through," he muttered. "I guess that's good."

Patrick began packing folded strips of Mrs. Clifford's dress on either side of the shoulder.

"Halloo in there!" a voice called from outside the saloon.

All eyes turned from Patrick and Mr. Clifford to the shuttered window and back door.

"Halloo!" the voice called again. "Can you hear me?"

"We hear you!" Corey shouted in reply.

"I want what's mine!" the voice told them. "You send Caruthers out and the rest of you can go free. You keep him in there and I'll kill the lot of you!"

"Who on earth is Caruthers?" Mrs. Clifford wailed. "He's shot the wrong man! My husband isn't this Caruthers."

"You can talk it over for a few minutes, but I want what's mine! Any of you try to leave that building before I get it and I'll shoot you!"

"You've got the wrong man!" Butler shouted. "There isn't any Caruthers here."

"He knows who he is!" the voice replied. "Now send him and mine out!"

Butler took a step closer to Patrick and Mr. Clifford. "It must be him," he announced. "After all, this fellow already shot him."

"My husband is a respectable man," Mrs. Clifford retorted. "He's a scholar. He took his degree at Bowdoin College. He has no reason to be masquerading as another man."

"Then you then," Butler turned on Corey. "You're just a boxer traveling around the countryside. Who knows how many names you've gone by?"

Corey shrugged. "I can't prove who I am. It's likely none of us can, but I do have two friends to vouch for me."

"Dr. Fulton," Miss Parson said. "Don't you think it's time you explained what is going on?"

Dr. Fulton was still huddled under the desk. "What . . . what are you talking about?"

"Oh come now, Doctor, you've been nervous since you boarded the stage." Miss Parson began ticking points off on her fingers. "Then a rock is propped up just around a sharp bend in the road so that our stagecoach breaks an axle. Your valise was stolen. Mrs. Clifford saw a man peering in at us from the darkness, and Mr. Callaghan and I found evidence of his horse. Now Mr. Clifford is shot, and you, the doctor, hide under a desk claiming you don't know what to do. I think you'd better tell us what is happening, or I'll ask Mr. Callaghan here to grab you by the scruff of your neck and hurl you out the door."

"He, he wouldn't do that," Dr. Fulton protested.

"Of course I would," Corey lied. "I'd do most anything Miss Parson asked me to."

"Dr. Fulton," Miss Parson said, "if we're going to help you, we need to know what's going on. I don't think we have much time."

Mr. Clifford groaned, distracting everyone for a moment as Patrick slipped a long strip of cloth beneath his shoulder to tie the bandages in place. "Best I can do," he apologized to Mrs. Clifford.

The Eastern lady looked from her husband to Dr. Fulton cowering beneath the desk. "You tell them," she ordered, "or so help me, I'll take Mr. Butler's shotgun and shoot you myself."

It seemed impossible to Corey, but Dr. Fulton actually grew paler. "His name," he mumbled, "is Nick Teller."

"Tell us about it, Dr. Fulton," Miss Parson suggested in the mildest, most encouraging of tones.

"I won't wait forever!" Nick Teller's voice called out.

"He'll wait a little longer," Miss Parson said. "Tell us about it."

"My name isn't Fulton," Caruthers confessed, "and as you guessed, I'm not a doctor. I'm a lawyer from a small town in Arizona where Teller became a notorious cattle rustler. Everyone was sure he was doing it, and one day we finally caught him in the act. But we had a problem. We sent for the Federal marshal right away, but we knew it might be weeks before he would come. We didn't even have a town jail, and Teller almost escaped from us."

Caruthers crawled out from beneath the desk so he could see everyone's faces. "So the town came to me and asked me to serve as judge and preside over the trial. They all knew I had studied law, even though I was making my living at a small down-on-its-luck dry goods store. So I agreed, and we held our trial and I sentenced Nick Teller to hang. Then wouldn't you know it, the marshal showed up, told us we'd overstepped our rights, and took Teller off our hands.

"We all thought it was over. My dry goods store went under, and I moved on. Then one day I looked up from a saloon in Denver and saw Nick Teller staring at me from across the room. I've been running from him ever since."

Caruthers stopped talking and the room pondered what he had said. "Well, I ain't got much use for lawyers," Butler informed them, "but I can't see turning a judge over to someone who would dry gulch a man."

"I'm waiting!" Nick Teller called out again.

"We also have to consider the possibility that Mr. Teller will kill the rest of us whether or not we turn Mr. Caruthers over to him," Miss Parson noted. "He's already shot Mr. Clifford, and he can't be certain how much Mr. Caruthers has told us."

"What are we going to do?" Mrs. Clifford asked.

"We are going to have to find a way to turn the tables on Mr. Teller," Miss Parson answered.

"Do you have a plan?" Corey asked.

"A very poor one," Miss Parson admitted, "but it might work if Mr. Caruthers will help us."

The lawyer shrank back from her. "What do you want me to do?"

"We need you to go outside and attract Mr. Teller's attention

while Mr. Callaghan and Mr. Butler try to reach Mr. Teller and stop him."

"I won't go outside!" Caruthers said.

"That really is a poor plan," Corey said, shaking his head.

"I haven't had much time to think of one," Miss Parson reminded him.

"Then let's think this through. Mr. Butler, if you were by yourself and wanted to see anyone leaving this building, where would you watch it from?"

Butler didn't hesitate. "The roof of that building next door. You could see both the front and the back of the house."

"Good, then we'll use Miss Parson's plan, and you and I will slip out one of the windows on the far side of the building and try to sneak up on him."

"Unless he's perched on that store's roof instead of the other one," Miss Parson pointed out. "And how will you reach him if he doesn't come down? We need to bring him at least partway to us. Mr. Caruthers, when Mr. Teller says he wants 'what's mine,' what is he referring to?"

"I thought he was talking vengeance," Mrs. Clifford said.

"That's it exactly!" Caruthers agreed.

Miss Parson pursed her lip. "I don't think so."

"I'm getting mighty tired of waiting!" Teller called out.

"He's definitely on that side," Butler said, pointing in the direction he had first indicated.

"I think you're right," Miss Parson agreed. "All right, let's try it. I don't see any other choice."

"I am not going out there!" Caruthers insisted.

"I guess I could put on his suit and pretend to be him," Corey suggested.

"No, Corey, me lad, you're too tall and too big," Patrick said. "I'll do it. If I can draw him in close, I think I could give him a surprise or two."

"Patrick!"

"You're too big," Patrick repeated, before jerking a thumb toward Caruthers. "And he's too yellow. It will have to be me."

Patrick began to unbutton his shirt. Caruthers followed suit.

"You're going to have to pretend to cower so you can hide your face," Miss Parson advised. "Don't make it easy for him. Fall to your knees and do a lot of trembling."

"It goes against the grain," Patrick boasted, "but I'll do the best I can."

He accepted Caruthers's shirt and slid it on.

"Pants and shoes too," Corey suggested. "And hurry it up. We don't have much time."

Caruthers spared a glance for the women, then sighed and stripped to his long johns. Patrick donned the clothing just as fast as the lawyer could take it off, ending with his black hat.

"You look terrible," Corey said when they had finished, "but it will have to do."

"Not quite," Miss Parson corrected him. "Mr. Caruthers, give Mr. O'Sullivan your medical bag."

The lawyer grabbed the bag off the floor and backed away from them until he huddled in the corner with the bag clutched against his chest.

"That's what I thought," Miss Parson said. "You're not a real doctor, so what is in the bag?"

Corey reached out and snatched the bag out of Caruthers's hands. It was heavier than he expected. He opened it and showed its contents to Miss Parson.

"Money," she said, "United States scrip. Were you his judge or his partner, Mr. Caruthers? I find the latter much more believable."

"I don't understand," Mrs. Clifford said.

"Mr. Caruthers told us his store went broke. If his story was true, why is he carrying thousands of dollars with him? I think he was selling the rustled stock for Mr. Teller and cheated him out of his share of the profits. Did you betray him to the law too?"

Remarkably, with his secret exposed, Caruthers began to look calmer and more composed. "What are you going to do?"

"Exactly what we were going to do before," Miss Parson told him. "There is still no reason to expect Mr. Teller to let us live through this experience."

"You're not taking my money out there," Caruthers said.

"No," Miss Parson agreed. "I don't think that would be expedient. We can use a few of Mr. Clifford's books to weight the bag."

"You send him out now," Nick Teller called, "or I just might shoot the lot of you."

"Tell him you're coming," Miss Parson suggested.

Panic flashed across Caruthers's face, but he did as he was told. "All right, you win, Teller! I'm coming out."

Corey slipped out of the room and snatched up several of Mr. Clifford's books. Miss Parson had emptied the black bag of a surprising number of bills and quickly reloaded it with the tomes.

She handed the bag to Patrick. "Be very careful, Mr. O'Sullivan."

Patrick nervously licked his lips. "I'll be all right." He turned to Butler. "Just remember that shot spreads after you fire it. I'd hate to be killed by you by mistake."

"I'll be careful," Butler promised.

Patrick grasped the door handle.

"I'm, I'm coming out!" Caruthers shouted.

Patrick threw himself through the open door and onto the ground, wrapping his arms around the black bag as Caruthers had so often done.

"Don't shoot me! Please don't shoot me!" Caruthers shouted.

Miss Parson caught the door before it could slam closed and held it about an inch open so she could see what was happening.

"Get over here, you slimy toad!" Teller shouted. "Get over here so I can kill you proper!"

"Don't kill me!" Caruthers whined. He really did look in fear for his life, even though it was Patrick who was in immediate danger.

"I said get over here!"

"Don't move, Mr. O'Sullivan," Miss Parson whispered. "Make him come down to you."

"Shoot!" Teller cursed. "If I have to come down there it will go worse for you!"

"Tell him he can have the money," Miss Parson whispered.

"The money is all yours!" Caruthers screamed. "Just don't kill me!"

"Let's move, Mr. Butler," Corey said. Both men slipped into the main hall and ran to the far end of the building where they slipped out the window.

"You're faster than me," Butler said, "and I have to get real close to use this shotgun, so I'll go around the front and you try to take him round the back."

"If that door or window opens at all," Teller shouted, "I swear I'll kill the lot of you!"

Corey sprinted along the wall of the building and peered around the corner. A wiry-looking cowhand was covering Patrick with a rifle as he slowly approached him. Patrick was at least seventy-five feet away from Corey. There was no way the boxer could close that distance in time to help him.

"We were partners, you slimy toad!" Teller shouted. "How dare you run off with the money and leave me to face the law?"

He was almost up to Patrick now. The old man continued to huddle on the ground over the black satchel.

Teller stopped walking. "Wait a minute." The rifle darted forward and knocked Caruthers's hat off of Patrick's head. "You're not—"

"Stop right there, rustler!" Butler shouted.

Teller whirled to face Butler and Corey sprinted forward. Seventy-five feet, twenty-five yards, he was never going to make it.

Teller fired his rifle, putting a bullet into the side of the build-

ing next to Butler. The stage driver jumped back, dropping his shotgun. A single shell exploded harmlessly into the air.

Corey pounded closer.

Teller adjusted his aim, firing again just as Patrick lunged off the ground and plowed into him.

The shot went wide.

Corey ran closer.

Teller slammed the stock of his rifle into Patrick's cheek, knocking the old man down. He saw Corey closing in on him, but Butler was also reaching for his shotgun.

Teller hesitated one fateful instant, and Corey Callaghan caught up to him.

Most cowhands were tough. They lived a grueling life from dawn to dusk year round and were used to hardship and pain. But Corey Callaghan was a professional bare-knuckle boxer, and he knew more about inflicting damage with his hands than Nick Teller had ever dreamed possible.

His right hand snagged Teller by the front of his shirt, and his left fist slammed repeatedly into the rustler's chin: three, four, six, eight times. He only stopped punching because Miss Pandora Parson caught hold of his arm.

"It's over, Mr. Callaghan. He's quite unconscious."

Corey looked at Teller's blood-covered face, then dropped him in shock. "Hell," he growled, "I hope I didn't kill him."

"He'll be all right," Patrick predicted. "That was some mighty fine punching you just did. You're left is really improving since you got injured."

As the tension of the moment eased, Corey found a laugh welling up inside of him. "You know me, Patrick. I like an opportunity to work with my hands."

"A mighty fine job, gentlemen," Butler said, clapping his arms across Corey and Patrick's shoulders.

"Corey, look out!"

Miss Parson's warning snapped Corey's attention away from Butler in search of the danger. Caruthers was outside the saloon picking up Butler's forgotten shotgun. A nasty grin twisted his face as he took aim at the three men. "Now that Teller's done, I don't want any problems with my money," he said.

Corey shoved Patrick and Butler away from him, but he knew he was too late.

A hollow click reverberated through the air.

For a moment everyone stood in silence, then Corey took a deep breath, stepped forward, took the shotgun out of Caruthers's hands, and hit the man with everything he had.

"I thought," Miss Parson said, "that only one shell fired when Mr. Butler dropped the gun."

"Me too," Corey agreed. "I guess we were lucky, because Caruthers had us."

Butler slapped himself on the forehead. "There was only one shell," he said. "I plumb forgot to reload after I had to shoot poor Socks."

"So now that they are tied up," Miss Parson said, "you can finish your work on the new axle. Then in the morning you and Mr. Butler can go down to the stage, repair it, and drive it back up here. Mr. Clifford isn't able to walk, and we'd have all sorts of problems moving the prisoners by foot."

"You're sure you'll be all right without us?" Corey asked.

"Of course, I'm sure," Miss Parson said. "Mr. O'Sullivan and I will have the rifle and shotgun and the prisoners will be bound. We'll be just fine while we wait for you."

"All right, then," Corey agreed, then changed the subject, watching closely for her reaction. "I noticed you used my given name when you thought Caruthers was going to kill us."

Miss Parson smiled. "Why, I don't know what you mean, Mr. Callaghan."

"I liked it," Corey said. "You're welcome to call me Corey anytime you like."

"Thank you for the courtesy, but I have my reputation to think about. Gambling and traveling with two boxers already strains it quite a lot."

"Perhaps just here in private, then," Corey suggested.

"Maybe this once, Corey, maybe this once." 🐦



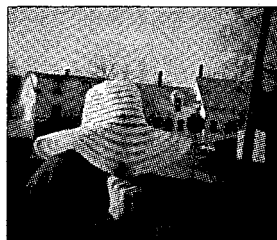
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THE STORY THAT WON

The July/August Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Marsha Ahrenkiel of Rapid City, South Dakota. Honorable mentions go to B. J. Bourg of Mathews, Louisiana; Rosalie Chappell of Merville, British Columbia, Canada; James R. Fitzsimmons of Long Beach, California; James A. Knoop of Clay, Michigan; Adrian Ludens of Rapid City, South Dakota; Stephen D. Rogers of Buzzards Bay, Massachusetts; Charles Schaeffer of Bethesda, Maryland; Susanne Shaphren of Phoenix, Arizona; and Gil Stern of Las Vegas, Nevada.



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KEEP IT UNDER YOUR HAT

MARSHA AHRENKIEL

It was forgivable, wasn't it?

On graduation day, after giving the Valedictorian's speech, I vented my joy and relief in a friendly scuffle with my buddy Scott—earning me a disapproving look from the principal, a ripped graduation gown, and a whoop from Scott as he grabbed the photo that had fallen out of my robe. "Your girlfriend?" he teased. "Hey, maybe someday you'll get to go out with a girl who doesn't have to cover her face."

"Yeah, until then I'll keep dating your sisters." I laughed.

I taped the photo to my shirt, over my heart, before putting on my graduation robe, wearing it as I received my diploma, hugs from my adoptive parents, and endured another public recitation about my "heroic" rise from battered child to whiz-bang scholar. Cramming information helped push away bad memories.

When I was seven, my birth parents drove off an icy bridge into Centennial Bay. Eventually, my father's body was found still strapped into the passenger seat. My mother resurfaced only in my dreams. In the bad ones, she'd try to protect me from my dad's violent rages. In good dreams, she'd laugh and play games, tossing out words in her native Italian. "*Capella*—that's *importante*: *Capella* means hat." Her maiden name had been Capella.

The photo had been mailed to me shortly after our local newspaper published a picture of me as high school valedictorian. It brought back all those dreams again.

It was forgivable, wasn't it?

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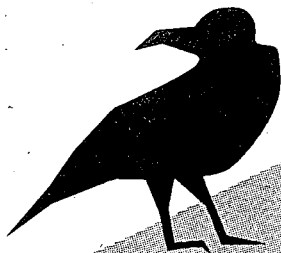
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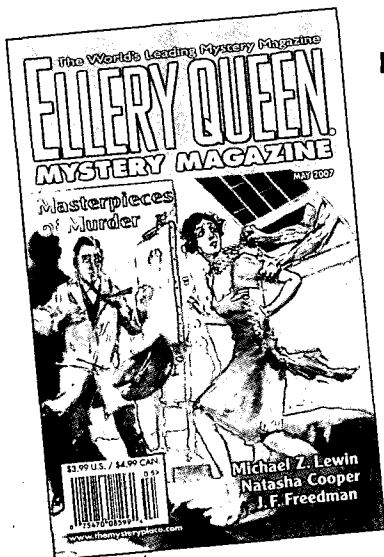
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